MONDAY REDUX

If you had the chance to relive a day to stop an incident of high school violence, would you? And what, exactly, would you be getting yourself into? Rego (like "we go") Poppel is cursed and blessed to have that choice. Or so he says.

Rego sits in jail. Overwhelmed with shock and guilt after his "friend's" shooting spree. His defenses are down. He'll tell you his story. He claims it'll be the unwashed truth.

You won't believe it. I wouldn't either, except it happened to me. That's so wrong. It happened to him—and to me, too, since I've gotta live with it. And so far, not so good. But I need to loosen the knot in my stomach. And someone needs to know things can't be erased, even if you could live one day twice.

Follow Rego beyond the brink, if you dare.

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Character Study

ALSO BY ROBERT FAVOLE

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"This is an masterfully plotted, tightly paced thriller which doubles as a razor-sharp critique of today's media-driven society. I loved it."

NURY VITTACHI
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"In a kind of 'Groundhog Day' meets 'The Terminator,'" *Monday Redux* is "a cautionary tale with a sting, leading readers effortlessly through the twists and turns of a gripping plot. [The] characters seethe with verisimilitude and their reactions to traumatic events are entirely believable. The cutting tongue-in-cheek humour is entertaining, but more importantly revealing, especially in the hilarious passages portraying the self-serving, questionable reactions of the popular media to a sensational story. *** An important voice."

PAUL MCGUIRE
Reviewer for the *South China Morning Post*

"Robert Favole, with *Monday Redux,* offers a thrilling time-traveller's tale for the cyber age, and an important look into the teenage zeitgeist."

KARMEL SCHREYER
author of *A Singing Bird Will Come, Naomi in Hong Kong*

Advance Praise for *Monday Redux*

"*Monday Redux* takes the young reader into the dark world of youth violence, but with a special twist that offers a way out of the darkness. It sends a good and strong message to kids about the important positive role they can play if they break the code of silence that prevents adults from getting the information they need to help troubled kids step back from the abyss."

JAMES GARBARINO, PHD
Cornell University psychologist
author of *Lost Boys*

"*Monday Redux* provides a unique perspective. What would we do if we had the chance to relive the day of a school tragedy?

Given a second chance, Rego Poppel faces the killer and his own shortcomings. Does he make the best decisions? Why is he offered this second chance? Does it really happen the way he thinks, or is he the victim of the worst of nightmares?

Don't expect Favole to hand you glib answers or work everything out for you. The importance of *Monday Redux* is that it will force you to think about what's gone wrong.

It's pretty addictive reading, too. And there's enough 'adult' in that Young Adult classification to keep anyone riveted 'til the end."

LISA DUMOND
SF Site
MEviews.com

MONDAY REDUX

MONDAY REDUX

ROBERT FAVOLE

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PUBLISHING

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In memory of Mark Fields.

Can goodness envelope the whole

Of an elementary school environment?

Yes, it can.

Mark, we miss you.

CHAPTER ONE

You won't believe it. I wouldn't either, except it happened to me. That's so wrong. It happened to him—and to me, too, since I've gotta live with it. And so far, not so good. But I need to loosen the knot in my stomach. And someone needs to know things can't be erased, even if you could live one day twice.

I keep telling myself I made things better. But they're not better enough and I feel like I'm gonna puke—or like I already puked and now I should cry, but it won't come out. I'm so tired, but I can't sleep. I'm worried who might show up in my dreams.

The sound of footsteps out in the hall scatters the images of my nightmare. The metal door groans and opens with a short, thick policeman attached, bull neck and buzzed hair. His face is wider at the jaw than the temples. Bad shave.

The radio is on out there. "We have got to find some way to protect kids from the prevailing popular culture."

Another media talking-head sounding like he knows something. Like the whole thing happened just to give him something to talk about between commercials.

The cop lets a guy into the little room. He steps toward the table, then turns back, like maybe he doesn't really feel like being here.

"Thanks, Officer," the guy exhales to no one because the cop's already swinging the door closed, silencing radiohead.

It's like I'm seeing without watching. He's wearing a brown suit. Jacket's all rumpled like he's been sitting on it for days. Doesn't fit across his gut. His tie is crooked. Not enough hair is plastered across his white, shiny head. And what there is looks greasy. He sits down across from me and puts a ragged yellow notepad on the metal table. He leans his forearms on the edge, and pushes up his glasses at the middle with one finger.

His nametag says **"SAM GURTON, PUBLIC DEFENDER."**

"Hello, Reginald. I'm Sam Gurton, your—," he swallows.

"Public defender," we say in unison.

He squints one eye at me, not sure how I knew. Sticks out his hand, but not like he really means it, extending and holding back at the same time. Looks clammy. Nails bitten down jagged, cuticles frayed. Dead fish with horse teeth. Are mine that gross? His hand hangs there too long, and then shrinks back. He balls it up and wraps his other hand around it, shielding it from the exposure and rejection. He smells like days-old cigarettes.

"Does that mean you're my lawyer?"

"You're under suspicion, so they assigned me to your case."

"But you're not into it."

"I'll do my best for you—that is, if you want me. You don't *have* to have me as your lawyer."

"Whatever."

"Have you spoken with your parents?" Spit sprays on the "p", but misses me. He glances at me, then down. Finding some droplets on the table, he wipes at them.

"No, I haven't."

"Do you want to?"

"I guess. They aren't going to like how this looks."

He nods, "I haven't spoken with them, but the police have called them."

I shrug.

"How old are you, Reginald?"

"Almost sixteen."

"Almost?"

"Next month."

He jots it down on his pad.

"Tell me what happened when they arrested you."

"They cuffed me. Made sure I didn't hit my head getting in the car. Brought me here." The cuffs had killed my wrists, but I'm not telling him. I didn't care anyway.

"Did they search you?"

"They patted me down at school. Took everything out of my pockets."

"They ask you any questions?"

"A few."

"Like what?"

"How to reach my parents. Did I know Lance was going to do this. Did I give him the guns."

"Anything else?"

I shrug.

"They read you your rights?"

"Yeah. Right after 'Suspicion of conspiracy to commit murder at school.'"

"Okay, good."

"Good? You kidding?"

"Don't talk to anybody. I'll come back later. Tell me about it then, and everything you say will be privileged. You know what that means?"

"Kind of."

"It means that I can't, and won't, tell anybody anything you tell me. And no one can make me tell."

No way this guy's ready for what I've got to tell.

"What about the mirror?" I look over to the large mirror on the wall to my right. "That's probably not there so we can look good."

"You're right, it's for observation, but they can't hear us."

"You sure there's not some hidden microphone?"

"There is, but they won't have it on."

"Right."

"Would you rather meet in a different room?"

"Whatever."

He pushes against the gray metal table with both hands to scoot his chair out. Only the chair doesn't move. The table moves, instead, stopping against my ribs. His mouth twitches, like he's thinking, "It figures." He hoists himself, walks to the door and knocks a couple of times.

The door opens.

"See you later," he says and plods out.

The radio spews, "desensitized by explicit violence, portrayed with ever more realistic graphics."

The door closes on Gurton and radiohead.

So, I'm in trouble. But I didn't do anything. And I'm not crazy. At least I wasn't. Now I don't care. Except I want to live today again. Twice was not enough. I need another shot at it. Sorry, bad choice of words.

Here's a better choice *Truth*. I'm gonna be honest with you about everything. Not everyday honest with things worked 'til you can face them. Not what-I-think-you-want-to-hear honest with things molded to fit a mask. And not I'm-setting-myself-up-for-what-I-want honest like Lance was always doing. Just straight and real. I'm not used to it. Probably you're not either. But I don't care anymore. I'm used up. I've got no shape. Nothing left to preserve. So here's what's true.

I don't even remember meeting him. He was just always there. The news guys call him Lance Henry Cummins, like he's so important he needs three names, or he's so toxic we need his full name to avoid contamination. "Lance-No-Chance" they used to call him.

We moved into our house when I was five. My memories of our neighborhood under construction are like black and white stills. Piles of dirt. A tractor. A lonely old farmer in coveralls. Seemed like he was from the past, like he didn't belong anywhere. It was probably his farm that was being scraped away to spread more suburbia. Maybe he sold it along with his way of life. Or maybe someone else had owned it, and he was being moved aside, obsolete, a living fossil, but significant to no one. I don't remember his face, what else he was wearing, or anything he said. Only that he had this sadness about him. I've never felt right about moving onto his lifeplace. I wonder if my parents even remember him.

So Lance lived around the corner and he's just there in my memories. Like the big tree out front.

You know when you're little, how you somehow just know kids and it's not complicated. Some are smart, some are mean, some are tough, some are nice. You sense it. Some you can trust. Some you can trust until something better comes along. That's Lance—sharp edged, sharp tongued, out for himself. He could be cunning or intimidating, pushy or patient. Whatever it took. And the truth was always his putty. As long as he got what he wanted, he didn't care.

Lance didn't throw his weight around for the fun of it, like some bully. Maybe he would have if he'd had some weight to throw around. But he was real skinny, and he was missing something on one side of his chest—the left side. Like there was no muscle there, so that side was sunken. He was so wiry, though, even the right side was a little hollow. Anyway, Lance was okay to be around sometimes when nothing else was going on, as long as you were doing things his way. And you had to watch out, 'cause you could never trust him.

The door groans again. This time it swings the officer into the room. His shirt buttons are under major stress from his spread.

"Get up, son. Come with me. Back to your holding room."

Nice name for a cell.

"And hustle. After what you've done—don't push your luck."

"I didn't do anything."

"You'll keep your mouth shut, if you know what's good for you."

I nod my head, keeping in mind what's good for me.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"You said something. I heard you."

"I didn't say anything."

"You'd better keep your mouth shut."

I nod.

"What'd you say?"

"I can't answer you *and* keep my mouth shut."

"Don't backtalk me."

The radio guy talks as we walk down the hallway. "My next guest is Dr. Glenda Chapin, author of a new book called *Divorce Can Improve Your Marriage*. Welcome."

"Thanks for having me on, Dave."

The genius cop escorts me into the holding room with a little shove between the shoulder blades. He closes the barred door. I sit on the metal cot that's bolted to the wall.

"Now, Glenda, my divorce was clearly more fun than my marriage." Radiohead laughs. "But divorce ends it all. How can it possibly improve something it terminates?"

"The next one, Dave. Divorce helps the next marriage."

"I see. Having failed once makes you an expert on how to succeed?"

"Oh, I've got more experience than that, Dave. I've been divorced four times."

"So you really are an expert."

I'd do anything to change it. The best I can do is to drown it out. Or distract and divert. That's what my mother would do. Nothing head on, no confrontation, no straight talk. But the longer things go unsaid, the heavier they become. I know, because I'm so quiet, everything is heavy. No, that's a truth molded to my mask. I'm not just

quiet. I'm timid and crippled by it. I've been trying to hide that for so long, saying it feels like spitting out something live and watching it wriggle. People used to say, "When are you going to come out of your shell, Reginald?" These, you might guess, were really sensitive people and enormously insightful. Not very helpful, though, since I didn't know what they were talking about. I was just inside myself. They don't say it much anymore. I guess they've given up. Or maybe it's 'cause I'm older now. Like they're free to say those things when you're younger, emotionally and verbally defenseless. Or maybe I hide it better now. I don't know. But it's easier to ignore when nothing's said. Like my scam is working, and I don't want to break the spell.

The cop comes back. Sweat drips down his sideburns and fills the crease of his double chin.

"Come on, you're wanted in the soft room."

"What?"

"It's a different conference room."

Weird name for an interrogation room.

"What for?"

"Your parents are here."

"Glenda," the radio guy says, "we have a few seconds left before the break. Tell our listeners the secret of marital bliss."

"Well, Dave, that's why they need my book." She laughs. "But really, the key is being selfish, because if you're not selfish, you will begin to resent your spouse. If your spouse isn't selfish, you'll never be sure where he or she is coming from."

"Isn't that contrary to the wisdom of thousands of years that a spouse should be generous, even selfless? You know, devoted."

"That's the great mistake, Dave. I've spent a lot of time re-examining the so-called wisdom of the ages, and I've come up with something better. You've got to commit to being selfish. There's just no substitute for it and my book tells you how to do it in every situation."

"Well, I guess nothing is constant but change," radiohead passes off another load of bull.

Through the doorway into the soft room, my parents and Defender Gurton are waiting, all standing. The cop closes the door. Finally, the radio guy and Dr. what's-her-name are shut up.

Nobody moves.

Gurton steps up. "Mr. and Mrs. Poppel, I'll leave you with your son for a few minutes, but please be careful what you talk about. Conversations between parent and child are not privileged and I haven't even had a chance to interview Reggie yet."

"Not privileged?" My father's face contracts.

"Let me explain." Gurton cinches up his trousers. "A privileged conversation, like one with your lawyer or your wife, can be kept confidential even against a subpoena. It encourages open, frank discussion between lawyer and client and between spouses, without fear the State can use it against you."

"And you're saying our talks with Reggie aren't privileged?"

"That's right, Mr. Poppel." His eyebrows rise like he asked a question.

"Open, frank discussions between a parent and child are discouraged?"

"Well—yes, in a manner of speaking."

"Great. If you will leave us alone for a few minutes, Mr. Gurton, we'll try to avoid anything open or frank."

Gurton bunches his lips and swallows. "Okay, Mr. Poppel." He knocks on the door, then turns back. "Sorry, Mr. Poppel." He clears his throat. "I didn't create the system."

The door swings open and Gurton leaves.

There's no mirror in this room. And there's a couch. The table is flush in the corner. Not set up for across-table confrontation. So this is soft.

"What in the heck happened, Reggie?"

"I didn't do anything, Dad, except try to stop Lance. He went off pretty bad."

"Who's this Lance?" Dad asks.

"You know, Lance, from the neighborhood," I say.

"I guess. He's the one who did this?" Dad's angry.

"I always knew there was something wrong about that boy," Mom says. But she probably never said it out loud.

"Anyway, I tried to stop him. Now the police suspect me."

"Oh, Reggie." Mom bunches a tissue to dab at her tears. "You didn't do anything wrong, right?"

"Well, I did a pretty bad job of stopping Lance. But I wasn't in on it at all. I didn't even know he was planning it."

"Thank goodness." Dad wipes his mouth with his palm. "But do you know how this will look to people?"

"I can't help that, Dad. I had to try and stop him. I didn't think how it would look to people."

That's not the real truth. I did think about what people would think. Otherwise maybe I wouldn't have screwed up so bad.

"You didn't know this Lance guy was planning this?"

Dad always doubts me.

"No, Dad." I look down. I fixate for a moment on a jagged crack in the concrete floor. A tiny ant seeks to navigate the chasm, but it's too wide. "Not 'til it happened. Not at first."

Mom starts to cry again. The tissue works side to side.

Dad groans. "Why does everything always happen to me?" He clears his throat.

Mom stops crying to give him a look.

"What?" Dad's defensive. "I said why does everything seem to happen to *us*? Why couldn't you have stayed out of it?"

"I did, at first, and a lot more people got killed."

"You're not making sense," Dad says. "You in shock or something?"

"I'm clearer than I've ever been, Dad, but if you want to hear more, we'll have to get into the open and frank stuff."

Mom lifts her face from her tissue, dabbing suspended. "John, let's get Mr. Gurton back." She stands.

My father pounds on the door with the fleshy side of his fist.

I look for the ant. Somehow he's made it over the divide.

When the door opens, Gurton trudges in.

My father is ready to blast him. Forehead stretched. Lips tight. Jaw clenched. Then he erupts. "This is outrageous. My son had nothing to do with this. They've got to let him go immediately. They'll regret it if our name is dragged through the mud on this. Reggie is so stressed out he's beginning to talk nonsense and he's not acting right. He doesn't need to be in jail, he needs one of those grief counselors."

Mom sniffles. "Everything'll be all right as soon as we get this misunderstanding straightened out." Dabbing resumes.

"I want you to tell the police, the D.A., or whoever, they'd better let our son go immediately or there will be trouble. We've got rights." Dad's face is red.

"I'll do my best, Mr. Poppel. Why don't you go home and try to relax and I'll call you after Reggie and I have talked."

"Relax? My business is too sensitive for that. My clients will go elsewhere at the drop of a hat. If you can't get Reggie out of here, I'll find a lawyer who can."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Poppel, but you should find another lawyer if that's what you want. In the meantime, I'll call you after Reggie and I have talked."

This time, Mom comes to give me a hug. I stand up. She cries quietly with her cheek on my shoulder.

Dad's feeling big. He nods at Gurton, then slaps me on the shoulder. "Hang in there, son."

They leave me with Defender Gurton.

"All right, Reggie—by the way, may I call you Reggie?"

"Most people do."

Actually, my friends call me Rego. You say it like, "we go." It's better than Reggie. But I'm not telling him that.

"Sit down, Reggie. Make yourself comfortable."

Is he kidding? The couch is gross. I sit at the table. So does he.

"Okay, Reggie, tell me about this whole thing."

"I was not in on it. What else do you want to know?"

"You weren't involved?"

"No, except by being too lame to stop Lance."

"So you knew this boy was going to do it?"

"Not the first time. I mean he said stuff about doing it, but I didn't believe him. The second time I knew."

"Whoa, wait just a minute. Nobody told me anything about a first time or second time. What happened the first time?"

"Lance had guns and bombs. He killed 14 kids, four teachers, and one custodian."

"I've never heard of that. When did that happen?"

"Yesterday. Well, actually it was today, the first time."

"You mean today was the *second* time."

"Yeah, the second time was today, too."

"Too?"

"Both times were today. I didn't stop him the first time. Then I got a second chance. And I tried to stop him. That's why I'm here."

"Let me get this straight. You're telling me that today, the first time, Lance killed 19 people and you had nothing to do with it? Is that right, so far?"

"Yes."

"Then you had a second chance and you knew about it and tried to stop him?"

"Right."

"And because you knew about it, they suspect you might have been in on it?"

"I guess."

"Does anyone else know about the first time?"

"Only Lance. And the guy who set up the time travel."

"Time travel?"

"Yeah. I went back in time one day."

Gurton nods. "Time travel. Like in the movies."

"Yeah, except this was real, through a wormhole."

"Do you use drugs, Reggie?" He looks me square in the eyes.

I look straight back. "No. Never."

"Reggie, I think you may be suffering some sort of severe stress reaction. Have you ever had any psychiatric treatment in the past?"

"No."

"Like counseling, medication, hospitalization?"

"No. Nothing."

"One more thing, Reggie."

"What?"

"How do you feel?"

"Wasted. Depressed. Sick. But clear."

"Have you been thinking about hurting yourself?"

"Hurting myself? You mean suicide?"

"Yes."

"Not that much."

"I'm going to talk to the judge about getting a doctor to see you. You'll be okay?"

"I'm not crazy."

"Of course not, and crazy isn't even a clinical word. You've just been through a very stressful experience and you're probably having a severe traumatic reaction."

"Everything I've told you is true."

"I'm sure it seems that way."

"No, it *is* that way."

"Okay, Reggie, okay. Take it easy. We'll work it all out."

Defender Gurton hikes up his pants and knocks on the door. In moments he's gone, thinking I'm totally nuts. Am I?

The truth has its costs.

CHAPTER TWO

The door opens again.

"All right, son." It's a different officer, dark haired. Bristles sprout from his ears. His glasses seem to launch a hawk of a nose. "Back to the holding room for now."

We head down the corridor. He creaks and clops, holster and heels, making a rhythm for the radio talk.

"Crisis in Our Schools," a voice booms with echo effects.

"Stay tuned to NewsOne Radio for up to the minute details on the Everett High School shootings."

They'll turn anything into a commercial.

"You need to use the can, son?"

"No, thanks."

"I can arrange a little more privacy." He nods toward the toilet-thing sitting naked in the cell.

"I'm all right."

Alone in my cell, I stretch out on the thinly padded cot. Every move squeaks the springs. I close my eyes.

"Hey, Rego. I'm making a list. You want to add some names?" Lance actually said that to me. It was six or eight months ago in the spring. I was sitting at one of those concrete picnic tables on the quad right after school. Lance came over, shoulders hopping, and sat on the table, feet on the bench. His right leg was hyper-bouncing.

"What kind of list?" I actually said that. What a dummy.

The cheerleaders walked by with their pom-poms and those little pleated skirts with broad stripes, maroon and white. They all wore ankle bracelets.

"That one's definitely on the list," he said, nodding toward their backs.

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a kind of party list. A one-man party. And Sara Ansleigh is definitely on it."

"What are you talking about, a one-man party?" I thought maybe it was some personal hot list or something.

"I'm making a list of those who deserve to be hit. It's a justice party."

"That's not funny, man."

"I'm just dreaming. Can't hurt to dream, right?"

"Why Sara Ansleigh? What'd she ever do?"

"She disrespects me. Looking down on me like she's some high priestess or something."

"That's it? That gets her on a hit list?" It was reminding me of that time when Lance, Eric, and JD had gotten a bunch of eggs and stuff.

"And she hangs out with all those jock jerks. Justice has got to be avenged. Am I right? Keeps the universe in balance."

It was last year. Lance, Eric, and JD had started talking about how this one girl, Leslie, had been asking for it. Eric or JD, I can't remember which, had called her up and she hadn't called back. Big injustice, right?

"So Sara disrespecting you and hanging out with jocks tips the universe out of balance?"

Lance had been pushing it, like where does Leslie get off not calling the guy back. I thought like, hey, it could be anything. Maybe she was grounded from the phone, or got the flu. Maybe she's too shy to call back. Or she didn't want to. That's her right. She hadn't even asked him to call or anything. But I didn't say any of that. Too, you know, quiet. I just took everything in.

So Lance had brought some eggs and a couple of squeeze bottles of ketchup.

"Sara thinks it's funny. The jocks always pushing us around, thinking they're all so big. Making life suck."

Lance had said the same thing about Leslie. She thinks she's so big, like she can be rude to us and it doesn't matter. Like not calling back was out of bounds. Like she was obligated, just because Eric or JD had called her. And somehow not calling back was supposed to have been rude to *us*.

"Some of the jocks are cool, Lance. Most of them are just regular. The ones that are jerks, I stay out of their way."

"They're all jerks when you get them in a group. Monster bulls or monster sheep. All the times they've looked down on me. Thinking they're better than us."

There's that "us" again.

Later that night, Lance had called Leslie's house. No one had answered. We took the eggs and all over there. It's

a quiet street. And we stayed quiet. Only the porch light had been on. Lance and Eric had the squeeze bottles. I stayed across the street. Lance, Eric, and JD had run, throwing eggs at the house. JD stopped on the sidewalk in front of Leslie's house. He threw a couple of eggs, I guess. Eric stopped there, too. Threw a few eggs, holding the ketchup at his side. But Lance had run down the driveway, throwing eggs, and then in front of the garage door, squeezing a squiggly trail of ketchup all along the house.

I threw one egg. It hit the bottom of the metal screen door with a galvanized thud and rattle. It was a thrill for about one second. I admit it. But it was too wrong, and I was embarrassed. Lance came running back up the driveway and we all ran away. And someone had a big mess to clean for no reason.

I don't know where they all went. I went home, scared the phone would ring, sick that I had been a part of that. Disappointed I hadn't tried to stop it. For me, the egg-throwing thing had tipped the universe out of balance.

"So you want to add some names to my list?"

"No, man, it's stupid. Shut up about it."

"Okay, but it could be a two-man party. Keep it in mind when those jerks are pulling on your clothes, or pushing you in the hall, or you cross the street to avoid them."

How did he know that?

He started walking away. "Think about it, Rego."

I thought about it. It was like with Leslie. Lance gets this energy going, this got-to-get-somebody-back thing. But it's not from anything anybody did. It's just pent up inside him. And this energy churns and grows like a storm and it needs to go somewhere. He hypes until some small incident builds in his mind into some great injustice. That's

when his incantation for vengeance begins. He twists the idea of justice, perverts it, just to relieve his bodily tensions. Too bad he couldn't just take some long showers.

Just then a football player walked by and slapped me up the back of my head as if to knock off a cap. But I wasn't wearing one. When I looked up he knocked my books off the table onto the pavement. "You dropped something." He laughed and stepped on my math sheet.

His footprint left a dimpled, tread-pattern impression across the instructions: "Simplify these expressions."

CHAPTER THREE

I guess I should start from the beginning, or at least a beginning. Today began as usual.

You know how you go around not appreciating the ordinary. Then something bad happens and "ordinary" is gone. Then you see, all along, things could have been worse. But by then, they are, and they'll never be the same again. That's when you start longing for the way things were. Today, the first time, was like that. I wasn't appreciating the old "ordinary." I didn't know its end was stalking.

My clock radio screamed me to the surface at 6:05. My favorite morning DJ team, Frank and Tanya, were screeching about Frank having seen some movie star at a restaurant.

"So, I'm a big fan, and also this big time radio personality, so I go up to her. She's sitting there with some woman.

I say, 'Hi, Deborah, just wanted to say hello. I enjoy your work and I hope you can catch our show sometime.' So, she smiles and curls her finger, like 'come closer', like she's going to tell me a secret. She whispers—well I can't repeat on the radio what she whispered, but use your imagination. It was something like, 'Bug-off, jackass,' then she sneers."

"What did you say, Frank?" Tanya asked.

"Nothing. I was dumbfounded."

"Well, you got the first part right, you were dumb." She snickered.

I slapped down on snooze and hunkered down, drowsy warm. Sleep is always the sweetest on days you have to get up.

I dozed until the DJs screeched again, then dragged myself up. Even the shower didn't penetrate the haze. I stumbled back onto the bed like a cat cozying into the folds. But I couldn't let myself go back to sleep. I dragged myself to sitting, in a stupor.

"Females are impossible to understand," Frank said. "Like one minute you're a prince and the next minute you're dirt."

"You've got that a little wrong there, Frank. You were always dirt. Most women can tell right away, but the ones you go out with are a little slow, it just takes them a little longer—like about one minute." Tanya cackled.

Trying to focus on the mirror, I brushed my hair down in front, like always. And like always, it wouldn't cover enough.

I dressed in clothes I hoped wouldn't get me mocked. I buy clothes to go with the flow. But every morning I have this flash that styles will have changed overnight, everyone

but me will know about it, and what was okay yesterday will make me a fool today. Stupid, I know, but I can't shake it.

Dragged through some breakfast, my dog Rex looking up at me hoping for a handout or some fallout.

"Can't do your best without a balanced meal to start the day." My father recited one of the mindless morning regulars from the unwritten list of parent directives. They never miss an opportunity to direct. Never take any opportunity to connect.

What does it mean, anyway, "do your best"? No one ever tells you. Maybe there's some rain forest herb out there, soon to be discovered and available in convenient capsule at your local health store, that could make you do your best without knowing what that exactly means. Except that probably some corporate android, doing his best, would have burned the last of the magic vine in a greedy dash to graze a few more mad cows.

Anyway, I scratched Rex's ear and patted his head. "See ya later, boy."

Ordinarily I walk to school. So that's what I did this morning.

Saw some guys in the hall. "Hi." They didn't hear me.

Got to my locker. "Hi, Nick," I said. I'm that clever.

"Hey, how you doin' Rego?"

"Good," I said. Also I'm original.

He slammed his locker. "See you later, man."

"Yeah." And funny, too.

Some gorilla walked by. "Get out the way, geek." He pushed me face first against my locker, cool, smooth, and hard against my cheek.

Ordinary day.

Sitting in first period, I couldn't take my eyes off Camilla's legs, long and smooth, graceful and strong. She sits one seat up, one row to my right. She had a tiny Band-aid where she'd probably cut herself shaving. I imagined a long single stroke of the blade clearing a perfect, smooth wake in the foam. Then right at the end, ouch, a little nick. Exquisite. Whoever said history class wasn't stimulating?

"Okay, people, I've got an outline for you," Mr. Baldacci said.

A few groans rose from the back.

"I intend this outline to be an adjunct to your reading of the text, not a substitute. It should facilitate your studying. It will not obviate the need for studying. And by studying, I don't mean sleeping with it under your pillow."

A few snickers from the back.

"I have in mind conscious mental activity. It should help, but, as always, whether it is of value is up to you."

Mr. Baldacci passed out the outline. Everybody took one and passed the rest back. When Camilla turned, she caught me looking at her. As she smiled, I looked away, pretending I hadn't been looking. I was so stupid. She smiled and I was stupid. Then the bell rang at just the wrong time. I didn't think I could get up without totally embarrassing myself. But I couldn't just sit there. Everyone was filing out. So I stood up, holding my books low in front of me and headed upstairs for second period. No one seemed to notice me.

Ordinary.

Second period is English. No Camilla. Whoever said English class is stimulating? At least I still had my imagination. And I needed it since we were assigned to write what Ms. Flowers calls a boilermaker, which is a twenty-minute

assignment that we write during class. Usually she gives us a topic and we write an essay. This one was different. She assigned a poem. About anything. In twenty minutes and with no forewarning, it would almost have to be stream of consciousness. The only problem was, I felt barely conscious.

Anyway, I closed my eyes, slumped in my chair, and waited for inspiration. Only two images came to mind. That smile. Those legs. Nice, but not helping me write a poem. Well, not one I could turn in. I sat up, and rested my head on my folded arms on the desk. Then, from nowhere, words started to come and I started to write. After a few scratch-outs, and changes, I was satisfied.

Optimistic sunrise spectrum
Yields to blue of heights unfathomed.
Gilded bright by midday's yellow,
Oblivious of song or howl,
Blends the blushes of sunset
And surrenders to dusk the twilight.
Yet in midnight's sterling twinkle
Finds the mettle to start anew, an always
Optimistic sunrise spectrum.

I handed it in feeling pretty confident that Ms. Flowers would fall for it. You know, that she'd like it. I felt pretty satisfied.

As always, I left second period and walked down the front stairway. My next class was in Room 105. I always liked the front stairway. It's really wide. Halfway down, there's a landing turn-around with glass display cases. I like that some of the stuff has been there forever, curling, faded construction paper outlining some way-back student

exploit. The banister is that really smooth, dull, silver metal. No matter how chunky, sticky, or gritty things get at school, that banister is always smooth and cool all the way down to the bottom. I always get to the bottom with a tinge of regret to let go and go on to whatever's next. That stairway never lasts long enough. Same thing today. I got to the bottom, slid my hand around the end, and let go. On an untethered space walk, self-contained life support, I headed down the hall.

Ordinary was gone in a bang. A series of bangs, actually. And shattering glass.

When I heard the first few pops, I had no idea what they were. I got about ten steps farther when four or five loud, piercing, explosions echoed from the hallway behind. I knew exactly what it was. I froze for a moment. Screams and kids poured from the hall and stairway driven by countless more shots. More glass breaking.

Some kids whizzed by, others were pinned by the clotting crowd, pushing, shoving. Some were knocked down and scrambled to get back up. Others tripped over discarded student stuff.

Then Lance came around that corner carrying some kind of gun. He was shooting into the stampede across the clearing that was opening before him. Some kids fell and just lay there. It was like some movie. Like I'd seen it before, lots of times. The crumpled students, the blood, the moans seemed unreal. Then, too real.This couldn't be happening. Right then, frozen and face-to-face with Lance and that gun, I was stung by the things he had said yesterday. And what he had said last spring.

Lance stopped. So did the kids who had made it down the stairs at exactly the wrong time. Everything hushed.

"Hey, Rego. You could have been in on this with me. You blew it."

I couldn't answer. His eyes looked so weird, kind of electric. His shoulders were still.

"I'll give you a chance. You pick. Her or you." He gestured toward the girl frozen on my right. "Your choice."

Gagged by everything, I flashed on being shot, pointless pain, a heap in a spreading red pool on a field of abandoned books and backpacks. Or picking the other kid to take that place. It was like an out-of-body experience. Out of reality. I looked over at her. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her lower lip was drawn in, quivering. She whimpered. Like face to face with an unreasoning, overpowering predator. I couldn't sit in judgment.

"Hell, wouldn't be right to shoot you." He turned and fired. She fell. As he shot again, a blur of a figure jumped between, then thumped to the floor.

I couldn't make sense of it, couldn't interpret my own senses.

"Nice gesture," Lance said toward the fallen custodian and fired again. "Rego, you get out of here."

Should I have told him to stop? To let us all go? I didn't.

"Just don't go out the front door. But definitely don't be here when I get back."

Lance headed down the hall toward the cafeteria, still shooting at walls, doors, at nothing, at anything that moved.

The fire alarm blared, piercing, immersing, depriving all hearing, but I already couldn't hear. It registered as a disconnected pain in my head. I couldn't think. I should be getting myself out of there. I knew I would be leaving all those kids behind, bleeding and moaning. The blare was

hypnotizing, blinding. I still couldn't move. Like tunnel vision, I watched Lance making his way down the hall, until he stopped, looked around, and ducked into the Media Room. Then the sprinklers rained on the clutter and confusion. Water from above puddled and mixed at the edges with the red.

I felt hands on my shoulders, shaking me, then turning me toward a face. It was Baldacci. His lips were moving. I stared at his mouth, but nothing seemed to be coming out. Was it his voice that failed or my ears? Or my brain? The alarm had finally pierced it. He gestured, pointed, and mouthed a syllable. Again, more exaggerated, and I got it. "Go!"

He pushed me. Finally I could move. And I did, walking, then running to one of the side doors. I hit the silver bar with both palms and the door swung before me. As soon as I was outside, a police car screeched to a stop across the walkway. Then another. The doors popped open. One of the cops grabbed me and hustled me behind his car and down to sitting.

"You okay?"

I looked up at him, still unable to read my senses. Was I hearing? The alarm was toned down out there. His eyes showed concern, brow furrowed.

"Are you okay?" He emphasized each syllable.

"Yeah." I was surprised I could make a sound.

"What's happening in there?"

"Lance has a gun. He's shooting everybody."

"How many shooters?"

"Only one that I saw."

"Where is he?"

"Heading toward the cafeteria."

"Point."

"Through there, and down the hall toward the back of school."

"What kind of gun?"

"I don't know. But it shoots fast."

"Who is he?"

"Lance Cummins."

"How many down?"

"What?"

"How many injured?"

"I don't know. A lot."

"Okay, son. Stay here."

"Wait, Lance said don't use the front door. Like maybe it's rigged."

The cop crawled into the front seat and talked on the radio.

I just sat there, leaning against the car, limp, soaked, ears ringing. Helicopters buzzed over, hovered and swooped away.

I couldn't keep my eyes opened. But every time I closed them, things played out over and over in my mind, then halted with that girl, Paulette, and the bead of red streaming down her arm and wrist. I hadn't said anything to stop him. And that's not the whole truth. If I had been able to utter a word, I would've picked her. If I could have lifted my hand, I would've pointed right at Paulette. Then, as though he read my mind, Lance shot her, right there next to me. And I hadn't done anything to help her, or the custodian who had jumped in front of her, or anybody else. I had thought just about myself and run away. Even Mr. Baldacci could tell I was useless. All I was good for was running away.

I always knew I wasn't real brave. Like times when I didn't stand up for myself. Like when I crossed the street to avoid somebody. But I always deluded myself that if it really mattered, I would be brave. Instead, when it had really mattered, I was the worst kind of coward. I didn't deserve to be walking.

I always knew Lance could be mean. And sometimes he would get on this thing about getting even with somebody who had done this to him, or that to him. But I never really thought that he would do something like this, even after what he had said on Sunday when we were hanging around on the street. Lance was sitting on the old mailbox, straddling it like a horse, and drumming both heels against the sides.

"Hey, Rego, I'm gonna get some justice at school tomorrow."

"Justice?"

"Yeah. Final justice. Hey, good name for a movie. You want in?"

"What're you talkin' about, Lance?"

"Take out some jocks and preps. Shoot up some of the snobs that are always disrespecting us."

"You're crazy."

"Come on, Rego. It'll be a blast. Literally. I know how to make bombs."

"Don't talk stupid, man."

He snickered. "Come on, Rego, can't you tell when I'm kidding?"

I guess I couldn't. I thought he was just spewing some of his personal venom.

Cop cars and trucks were all over the place. Another cop hustled me behind a further row of cars. Two more

started asking questions. My name. What had I seen? Had I heard the shooter say anything? Were there more shooters? Maybe on the second floor? Did I know where Lance was headed, or what his plan was?

After all that, they told me to walk to the Adams Elementary School where it would be safe to wait for my parents.

Starting across the parking lot, I noticed one of those TV vans. By the time I was halfway across, two people had gotten out of the van, a man with a camera and a woman with a mike. Clearly they had targeted me and set a course to intercept me. They closed on me, ears pinned back, mouths agape.

When I got to the sidewalk, the woman shoved a mike in my face.

"Did you see any shooting?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?" A breeze from behind blew her hair into her face. She fished out a strand from her mouth, and tried to push all the fly-aways back into place.

"Reginald Poppel."

"And you go to Everett High School?"

"Yes."

"What did you see?"

"Lance with a gun shooting people."

"Do you know this Lance?" The breeze blew again and a bit of her hair stuck to her lipstick. She was getting annoyed, having only her right hand free to hold her hair in place.

I guess I was distracted by her efforts to get her hair unstuck, because I didn't answer.

Her annoyance crept toward me, and she glared at me. "Well, do you know him?"

"Yeah. It's Lance Cummins."

"And you saw him shooting kids?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"I don't know. A lot."

"Who did you see get shot?"

I thought I would gag. I fought it down. "Paulette Gidot. The custodian. Others, I don't know."

"Was Lance doing this because he had been bullied?"

"I don't know."

"There are bullies in your school, aren't there?"

"Yeah."

"And Lance got bullied a lot?"

"I don't know."

"Have you been bullied?"

"Yes."

"A lot or a little?"

"A lot, I guess."

"Did they pick on him lately?"

"I don't know."

"There are still bullies there, right?"

"Right."

"And he just couldn't take it anymore?"

"I don't know, really."

"Is he an outsider?"

"No. He's a student."

"No, I mean what group is he in? You know, is he a jock?"

"No."

"In the popular group?"

"No."

"A prep?"

"No."

"A skater?"

"No."

"Was he rejected by all these groups?"

"I don't think he really cared."

"Didn't he want to be popular?"

"He probably used to, sure. But I don't think he really cares."

"So then he wasn't popular?"

"No."

"What does he like to do?"

"Hang out. Play video games. Listen to music. He likes the internet."

"Is he interested in guns?"

"A little, I guess."

"What makes you say that?"

"Sometimes he would talk about them. Like after a movie."

"What would he say?"

"Like, 'Did you see that gun? Wasn't that cool?' Something like that. Or on a video game, about how one weapon was better than the others."

"Does he own any guns?"

"I don't think so."

"What kind of video games does he play?"

"He likes one called 'The B.R.' It's where you rob a bank, and you get points by getting away."

"Do you shoot in that game?"

"Yeah, if anyone moves you've got to shoot them or you can't get away."

"Is it one of those bloody games?"

"You'd probably think so."

"Does he have a website?"

"Yeah."

"What's the address?"

"I don't know. I don't go on it. It's just stuff about the games and music he likes and stuff."

The reporter looked distracted for an instant, then she turned away from me. "Let's go, Bud." She ran toward two other students who were making their way across the parking lot. The cameraman ran after her, handling the camera pretty easily. I watched them pounce on the other two before I turned away.

Adams was in chaos. Kids from Everett were arriving in droves. A lot were crying and hanging onto friends. Some had collapsed and sat there weeping. Others wandered around or leaned on the wall, blank, like zombies. I wandered over to the wall. I was hoping that nobody at Adams had witnessed my exposure in the hallway.

Parents were arriving to pick up their little kids from Adams. I guess they had been dismissed because of the trouble. Parents were stopping their cars just anywhere and running in panic to find their kids. And high school parents were starting to arrive looking for their kids, too, and becoming hysterical because none of the Everett kids seemed to match any of the parents.

With cars stopped everywhere, traffic snarled and backed up onto the street. Horns sounded. Stoic parents stood in silence, lost. Frantic parents wailed. Crazed parents demanded.

Finally, Mr. Fields came out to direct traffic. Seeing him was probably the first time I'd really breathed since I left Everett. He had been the principal when I went to Adams. He was nice. Always, he knew everybody's name and

would say hi to you. He never called me Reginald. He'd always say, "Hey, Rego, what's news?" He's the only one who knew to call me Rego. I'd always say, "No news, Mr. Fields." He'd say, "No news is good news".

In no time, Mr. Fields had the traffic moving. People seemed to want direction. He sent the Everett kids over to the playground and had some of the Adams teachers calming people and calling out students' names for the parents. More and more Everett students arrived, and finally there were a couple of matches. A few parents, some crying, some looking relieved, took their kids home.

Then I heard something that hit me like a sock of coins in the head.

"Paulette Gidot. Is Paulette here?" It was Mrs. Karsten. She was standing with two women. One must have been Paulette's mother. "Paulette Gidot. Has anyone seen Paulette Gidot?"

I didn't know what to do. I knew where she was. Would they hate me for what I had done?

I took a tiny step forward and raised my hand about halfway. Mrs. Karsten didn't even see me, but one of the women did.

"There," she said, pointing at me.

"Come here, son," Mrs. Karsten said. "Have you seen Paulette?"

I guess she could tell by my face, because Paulette's mother looked stricken even before I said anything. I started to sway.

"Where did you see her, son?" Mrs. Karsten took my arm.

I opened my mouth, nothing would come out. Finally, "In the hallway."

"Is she okay?" Paulette's mother's face began to stretch and twitch.

"He shot her. By the stairs. Then the custodian jumped in front of her and he got shot."

Mrs. Gidot made this horrible shuddering moan and collapsed in a faint. Straight down, like a building that falls flat on itself.

Mrs. Karsten and the other woman bent to comfort her. I couldn't take my eyes off her. While Mrs. Karsten held Paulette's mother, the other woman rummaged in her purse. She pulled out a phone and began dialing.

I hate when I don't know what to do. Usually I can just do nothing. That's weak, but I'm used to it. This time it felt like I had to do something. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. Telling her didn't help. It's not like she could go in and get Paulette out. It was my fault Paulette was shot. And I left her there in a crumple. Now I had told her poor mother and she was in a crumple. I was a family curse.

I backed to the wall. Way over my head and going down.

CHAPTER FOUR

They got Paulette's mother up and, supporting her one on each side, they led her away. I was relieved, but I was disappointed also, on edge, desperate for some suggestion that they thought I was okay. That telling her about Paulette was the right thing to do. I was paralyzed, imagining Mrs. Gidot turning back, looking over her shoulder and nodding, indicating she was absolving me. But instead, they left without even a glance back.

All the elementary school parents had come and gone with their children. One by one, the Everett kids were hooked up with parents and had headed home, until only a few of us were left. I didn't know what to do. Then Mr. Fields came. He went to each lost remainder, in turn, with a pad and pen. By the time he reached me, I must have shrunken, because he leaned over to talk to me.

"Hey, Rego, it's going to be all right."

I couldn't talk. I thought I would cry.

"I know it's been tough, Rego-Bud, but you're not alone. I'm here to help."

I looked into his pale blue eyes and wanted to hug him. I just nodded.

"You need a ride home?"

I nodded. I could've walked, I guess, but I couldn't imagine navigating the streets I had walked my entire life. Besides, I needed to stay near Mr. Fields.

"Are your folks home?" His ruddy face radiated warmth and real concern. Always had.

I shook my head.

"Can I reach them by phone?"

I shrugged.

"What's the number?"

Finally I spoke, giving him my father's work number.

He wrote it on his pad.

"What about your mom?"

"She's away visiting."

"After I talk to the rest of the kids, I'll call your father. Okay?"

I nodded. I meant thank you so much. My lip quivered.

I watched him speak with each remainder kid and write down phone numbers. Then he went inside. I pictured him in his little interior office, behind its glass walls, reading phone numbers from his pad and making calls. Reassuring each parent.

When Mr. Fields came back he said, "Okay, everybody, I made the calls and in a few minutes some of your parents will be here."

When he said "some", he didn't mean me. I knew it. My parents weren't coming. And that was okay. Better

actually, because I couldn't deal with them right then, not my mother's fawning worry, not my father's phony worry. I know that's not fair. His worry isn't phony. That's not really it. It's that his worry for me would still be all about him. It'd be 'cause he needs to control everything, or he needs to feel like a good parent, or his concern over what people would think. His worry would be real. Really all about him. I couldn't deal with it.

Mr. Fields walked over to me. "I couldn't reach your father, Rego. I left a message that you're okay and that you're at home. And I'll be happy to give you a ride. Go sit in the office for a few minutes." He patted my shoulder.

I don't even know how I got to the office. I leaned against the wall and stared into his little glass room. After a while I slid down to the floor. Three other kids came in. One guy sat in the corner, knees hugged to chest, and rocked. A girl sat at one of the desks with her head down on her folded arms. The other guy slumped on the bench.

I had never been in trouble, never been "sent to the office" that way. It had always been a friendly place for me, the smiling face of the secretary who really liked kids, never sour. Lance didn't like it. He was always being sent there for throwing a rock on the playground, food in the cafeteria, paint in the art room, or some other thing. But even Lance liked Mr. Fields.

In a few minutes, he returned. "Okay, let's go."

I sat in the back, leaning against the door, watching the houses go by.

What makes you think of something you haven't thought of for a long time? Something makes it pop into your head and you're stuck with it. That happened to me in the car. Staring out the window at nothing, I thought of

a time Lance and I were hanging out by the old mailbox. He was sitting on top of it. He was wearing a long sleeve shirt. Normally I wouldn't remember something like that, but as I stood on the ground, eyes at the level of his wrists, a bead of blood trickled from under his sleeve and down his hand. I saw it before he felt it.

"You're bleeding, man."

"What?" He asked, but he already knew. He held his arm up, to reverse the flow, I guess.

"What's wrong with your arm?"

"I scratched myself with a knife." He hiked up his sleeve. "See?"

He had three long scabs, fresh and angry, running parallel down his forearm. One of them had cracked and started to bleed. His arm looked like he'd been raked by a three-clawed cat.

"How'd that happen?"

"I did it."

"You mean, on purpose?"

"Yeah."

"What for?"

"I had a particular itch, so I got a knife and scratched it."

He looked at me like his eyes were trying to drill a reaction from me. I wasn't sure which one.

"You did it three times?" That's crazy, but I didn't say it.

"I wanted to see how it would feel to cut myself. I wanted to see *if* it would feel."

"Didn't it hurt bad?"

"Not really. I didn't feel anything."

The image stayed with me of that rivulet of blood striping his arm, collecting in a droplet and falling to the

ground. I didn't know what to think about it when it happened. Was he punishing himself? Trying to make himself feel something? Had he turned that churning, got-to-get-somebody energy on himself? I still don't know.

"You're next, Rego," Mr. Fields said, catching my eye in the rearview mirror. He had already dropped the others off.

"Do you want to talk, Rego?"

I shook my head.

"That's okay."

Then I nodded, but I didn't know what to say.

He turned around to face me. "Was it Lance?"

I nodded.

"And you saw some shooting?"

I looked down.

"Mrs. Karsten told me. That's pretty rough stuff."

My eyes moistened. I got that choky feeling in the back of my throat and my lower lip jumped so I couldn't talk. I fought it, until finally, "I didn't—help." I gulped.

"Rego, that's not your fault. And no one would ever blame you for that."

Would he still say that if he knew the whole thing? If he knew I would have picked her?

We pulled up in front of the house.

"Do you think anyone's home yet?"

I shook my head.

"Come on. I'll sit with you until your folks get home."

I couldn't do that. I couldn't have him sitting in my house with that huge truth hanging there unsaid. I would have picked Paulette. And I could never tell him. I couldn't stand the idea of ruining myself in his eyes. "No. I'm okay."

"Are you sure? I don't mind."

"I'm fine."

He picked up his phone and pad of numbers. "How about if we try your father again?"

"Okay."

He dialed.

I looked over to our front door. I knew Rex knew we were here and was waiting, tail wagging.

"Hi, Mr. Poppel, please." Mr. Fields turned to me. "He's there." Then, into the phone, "Yes, Mr. Poppel, this is Dave Fields, Principal over at Adams Elementary.

"Well, Mr. Poppel, I have your son with me—he's okay, but I think he's feeling a little upset with what's gone on over at Everett.

"Yes, a terrible thing." Mr. Fields looked over at me and nodded as he listened to my father.

"I was a little concerned about leaving him home alone.

"Sure, just a second." He handed me the phone. "He wants to speak to you."

I put the phone to my ear. "Hi, Dad."

"You okay, Reggie?"

"Yeah, fine."

"Will you be all right until I get home?"

"Sure."

"I can't get away this minute, but I'll be home early."

"I'm okay, Dad."

"Then I'll see you in a while. Let me speak to Mr. Fields."

I handed the phone back.

Mr. Fields listened, then said, "Okay, Mr. Poppel. I just wanted to check in. Don't mention it. I'm glad I could help. Goodbye." Mr. Fields hung up.

"Listen Rego, I really don't mind staying a while."

"I'm fine, Rex'll keep me company."

"Rex?"

"My dog."

"Oh, for a second I thought you had a brother who hadn't come through Adams." He scribbled on a clean page of his pad. "Here's my phone number. You call me anytime for anything. I want you to. Okay?" He ripped the page off and put it in my hand.

"Okay, Rego?"

"Okay. And thanks, Mr. Fields."

"No prob, Rego. Now you call if you need anything. Or if you just want to talk."

I nodded.

I fumbled for my key. My hands were shaking and I couldn't seem to work it. I knew Rex was getting excited, waiting just on the other side. Finally, when I opened the door, Rex was grinning and wagging his tail as if nothing had happened. He wagged so hard his entire rear end swung as he walked circles around my legs. I bent over to pet him, then squatted next to him. He bumped me and almost tipped me over. I think I almost smiled. But the day's images intruded.

I stumbled through the entry, into the living room and onto the couch.

I've watched the custodian lots of times doing his work, always on the edges. Wheeling his trash can in the cafeteria. Moving with his cleaning cart along the wall. Not even a living thing to most of the students, just a shadow on the fringe. No one notices shadows. Shadows are just there. A person? It wouldn't dawn on anyone even to consider it. How could he face the endless days invisible? Or worse, demeaned. But the shadow had had the substance to

absorb a bullet for a stranger, a dweller of the other plane. What was his name?

I turned on the TV.

The banner, "Crisis in Our Schools", inched across the screen as a deep voice warned, "Updates on the Crisis in Our Schools at the top of every hour." Then the screen cut to commercial. Dancing cats sang the praises of some special quality of kitty litter.

I changed the channel. The old guy with the bushy eyebrows, big mustache and craggy face was doing his wannabe news show.

"We have a live report from Everett High School." He was talking out of one side of his mouth.

The screen divided into two boxes. His perpetual sneer was on the left. On the right was that same reporter who interviewed me. The camera panned the chaos of police vehicles and officers against the backdrop of Everett and then back to her. The same damn one.

The craggy sneer said, "Let's check in with our reporter on the scene, Venus Flaumgarten. Venus, what's going on out there?"

"Well, Charles, we arrived on the scene a few minutes after the shooting started. We were able to speak with some of the first students evacuated from the high school. These kids were fleeing and we caught up with them only moments after they had cleared the building. Early indications are that there is a single shooter in the school. He has been identified as Lance Henry Cummins, a student here at Everett. He has some kind of rapid discharge weapon and there are multiple gunshot victims. We don't know how many or how badly they are hurt."

"Are there any confirmed fatalities, Venus?"

"As yet, we have no information on that, Charles."

"And this Lance Henry Cummins is still in the school?"

"As far as we know, he is still inside. Of course, the police have not been inside yet. They are concerned about bombs and booby traps and have nothing definitive. Indeed, the only information we have, Charles, comes from the evacuating students.

"Here's an interview we taped as one student was leaving the school building. As you will see, he knows the shooter very well and his answers paint a picture of a troubled loner who faced incessant bullying and ridicule and who was obsessed with guns and violence."

Did she mean me? I hadn't said any of that.

"We'd love to know what you found, Venus. Can you stand by for a minute while we take a station break?"

"Sure, Charles."

"Great. When we come back, then, we'll have an interview with a friend of the alleged Everett High shooter, Lance Henry Cummins. Please stay with us."

"Violence in Our Schools" scrolled down the screen in bold letters. "More on the latest school violence when we return from these messages," a deep voice promised.

The screen changed to cartoon bubbles, each with eyes and mouth, singing while waging war on greasy sinks and tiled counters. I hit the mute to kill the inane sudsy song.

Who had she interviewed who had said those things about incessant ridicule? Had she found Eric or JD running from school? Would they say those things?

Finally, the screen was divided in two again and I canceled the mute. "We have with us, live on the scene, our reporter, Venus Flaumgarten. Venus, you have an interview

with an evacuating student who is a good friend of the alleged shooter, Lance Henry Cummins?"

"That's right, Charles. I taped this interview with a student as he was literally fleeing for his life. Here it is."

As they rolled the tape, the right half of the picture expanded, filling the entire TV with the taped image of the reporter. The camera drew in for a close-up. The breeze swept back her hair.

It was then I first flashed back to her interview of me. She hadn't been able to keep her hair out of her face. She must have turned around to do this introduction.

"I'm standing here in front of Everett High where horrific events are unfolding. In another case of the effects of the bullying that has become endemic to our schools, this morning a student, a loner who had been pushed beyond the brink, brought a gun to school and started shooting classmates. With us, we have a student from Everett High. What did you see?"

The camera switched—to me. "Lance with a gun shooting people." I looked so weird on TV, chubby and like I was about to cry. The school was in the background.

The camera went back on her. "Do you know this Lance?" That's when her hair had stuck to her lips, but on the TV, the breeze was sweeping her hair back off her face. And she looked so symphathetic.

The picture switched back to me. "Yeah. It's Lance Cummins."

"And you saw him shooting kids?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"I don't know. A lot."

"Who did you see get shot?"

"Paulette Gidot. The custodian. Others. I don't know."

The camera switched back to her. "Was Lance doing this because he had been bullied?"

Then back on me. "Yeah."

I never said that. Something was weird with that tape.

"How much did he get bullied?"

"A lot, I guess."

"And they bullied him relentlessly?"

She never asked me that.

"Right."

There I was on the TV, answering questions I'd never been asked, looking like I'd said things I never actually said.

"And he just couldn't take it anymore?"

"I guess."

"Is he in the popular group?"

"No."

"But he wanted to be?"

"Sure."

I hadn't even said that. I'd said he probably used to.

"Is he interested in guns?"

"Sometimes he would talk about them. Like after a movie."

"What would he say?"

"Like, 'Did you see that gun? Wasn't that cool?' Something like that. Or on a video game, about how one weapon was better than the others."

The rest of the interview was pretty straight. I mean they played it like I'd said it. No new questions taped afterward. No answers paired with the wrong question.

On some invisible cue, the screen divided back into two with Charles on the left and Venus, live, on the right.

"Well, Charles, after this interview, we went on the website, and what we found was indeed shocking."

"Venus, can you stay with us through one more commercial break?"

"Definitely, Charles."

He turned his perpetual sneer to the audience. "We'll have more on the shocking website of Lance Henry Cummins, the alleged Everett High shooter, after these messages. Stay with us."

I hit mute again when the singing animated chocolate button dove into the vat to get candy coated.

As I stared at the inane cartoon images on the silent TV, I wondered how often reporters change interviews like that. By retaping questions, by splicing, and cutting, she had gotten what she wanted, the hair out of her face, and the answers out of my mouth. Had they drastically changed the meaning of what I said? Not drastically, I guess, but it felt wrong. I was like a cartoon. Or a puppet. Call me Pinocchio, a puppet who looks just like a real boy.

I couldn't concentrate anymore. My head hurt. My brain was moving so fast I couldn't focus on one single thing. I couldn't sit still. I paced in front of the couch, but it didn't help.

I canceled mute as soon as the show's intro replayed.

"Okay, we're back with Venus Flaumgarten on the scene at Everett High School. Venus, you have some information about the website of the alleged shooter?"

"Yes, Charles. We found that, in fact, it was not simply devoted to the movie and video game preferences of Lance Henry Cummins. What we found was truly shocking."

Charles's bushy mustache and craggy face drew into his look of sarcastic interest. "Really. Do you have it for us, Venus?"

"Well, Charles, they have already pulled it off line because it clearly qualifies as hate speech. Let me read the joint statement of the police department and the internet service provider: 'Due to the nature of the hate speech on this website, that it would be offensive, intensely inflammatory, and that its continued availability might hinder official investigations, we are barring access to this website.'"

"I thought you said we had it," Charles said.

"We do. Indeed, as soon as we learned that he had a website, we pulled it up and copied it. And while we believe the public has a right to know, we are, for the moment, adhering to the official request that we refrain from actually showing the site. But I can describe it for our audience."

The TV screen filled with a website homepage, with most parts blurred out.

"The site absolutely spews poison, Charles. Racial minorities, immigrants, religious denominations, and political organizations of every stripe are singled out for violent, obscenity-laced, assault. The site is replete with tirades against student athletes, high achievers, popular kids, nerds, indeed, almost any group you can imagine. And each includes a call for violence. Charles, I must say, I'm nearly speechless in the face of all the venom."

"Any references to bullying or a revenge motive for perceived injustices?"

"No, Charles, such references were, in fact, conspicuously absent."

"Interesting. Thanks for an excellent report, Venus."

Venus nodded her head and her picture faded out.

Charles occupied the entire screen. He held his forefinger up to his earphone. "I understand that we have another reporter on the scene with a live interview with a police officer who was inside the school during the entire episode."

The screen divided again.

"Charles, I'm standing here with Officer Joe Santana who has just come out of Everett High School." The reporter turned to a young officer with buzzed dark hair, leaning on his holster the way cops do.

"Officer Santana, I understand that you happened to be in the school when the shooting started."

"Yes. I was in the office doing follow-up on an unrelated matter. I was waiting for the principal when we heard the sound of gunfire."

"How close was the shooting?"

"Not close. Like maybe it was upstairs. But there was no question about what it was."

"What did you do?"

"I immediately called it in and was instructed to maintain my position."

"You were told not to move?"

"That's right. We didn't know how many shooters there were, or where they were. So I was ordered to stay put and wait for backup."

"That must have been hard to do as the shooting continued."

"Yes sir, that was extremely hard to do." Officer Santana looked down for a moment, then directly into the camera. "But my duty is to follow orders and that's what I did."

"How long did it take for backup to arrive?"

"It took about two hours before the building was secured."

"Have you determined how many shooters there were?"

"It appears there was only the one."

"And what's the status of Lance Henry Cummins?"

"We have not located him. He is not in any of the Everett buildings and his car is not on campus."

"So he is at large."

"Yes, sir, armed and dangerous. Everyone should exercise extreme caution."

"Thank you, Officer Santana."

"This is Robert Uppley reporting. Back to you, Charles."

Charles filled the screen.

"Let's recap events: Everett High School has been ripped by gun violence. A student alleged to be Lance Henry Cummins has gone on a shooting spree. At this moment we have no corroborated casualty count, although it seems as though there are several, perhaps many. The police were incredibly cautious in entering the school, concerned, apparently, for their own safety. Initial reports that an officer happened to be in the school office when the shooting started were correct. He was ordered to do nothing as the shooting continued. Lance Henry Cummins remains at large, armed and dangerous. Joining us now in the studio is Bart Shartsis, an investigative consultant."

The camera pulled back to reveal a man in a business suit sitting at the table with Charles. Below them on the screen was a banner that recited: "Bart Shartsis, Expert in Investigative Techniques."

"Good to see you again, Bart." As though he hadn't been sitting there right next to Charles the whole time.

"It's nice to be back, Charles."

"Now Bart, you've seen all the pictures of the police and SWAT teams and state police swarming all over the school grounds. Do you think they acted properly in failing, for two hours, to enter that school to see if there were students, faculty or staff they might have been able to save?"

"There's no question in my mind, Charles, that leadership was lacking on the scene at Everett. With the amount of time that passed, with a shooter still at work in the building, and who knows how many injured lying there in need of assistance, it's incomprehensible to me how the police, who are trained for this type of action, did not storm the building. Take it back for the people they have sworn to protect."

"What about the possibility of bombs and booby traps? Doesn't that call for caution?"

"Of course it calls for caution, Charles. But nothing justifies inaction. Cautious action is called for, but action nonetheless."

"Doesn't the school district bear major responsibility here?"

"No question. If my information is correct, the school employed no techniques for predicting this sort of event. They simply did not use the profiling tools available to them. For example, my company sells computer software that identifies students at risk of engaging in serious violence at school."

"How does it work?"

"The administration simply keeps certain behavioral fields up to date and the program identifies those students

that should be watched or should be the subject of an intervention. Simple as that, the computer generates a list."

The phone rang.

I walked away from the TV and picked it up.

"Hello." I realized I was still holding Mr. Field's number and tossed it down by the phone.

"Rego."

"Hey, Matt."

"I saw you on TV, man. How did that happen?"

"They got me when I left school."

"And you saw some stuff, huh?"

"Yeah. What about you?"

"No. I was in Music. Mr. Kranick locked the doors. Nothing happened 'til the police took us out, except some people had to piss real bad by that time. And the alarm drove us crazy. Everyone was soaked, sitting against the wall with their hands over their ears. It hardly helped. I can still hear it."

"Yeah."

"What happened with you?"

"I was in the hall. Lance came right up to me. Shot a lot of people. He let me go."

"Lucky."

"Yeah."

"What's up with Lance, anyway?"

"I don't know. It's unreal. Almost like he was enjoying it. You wouldn't believe all the blood and stuff." My throat started thickening.

"I know. You all right, man?"

"Yeah."

The phone clicked a call waiting.

"Listen, Matt, there's another call. I better get it."

"Okay, I'll catch you later."

"That'd be good."

I picked up the other call. "Hello."

"Reggie, it's Mom. I'm so glad you're all right. You are all right, right?"

"Yes, Mom."

"What happened, Reggie?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? The news up here has been nonstop about shootings at your school. Grandma and I have been awfully worried. And you're home early. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes."

"Well, what happened, Reggie?"

"Lance started shooting people."

"Oh my gosh. Lance Cummins?"

"Yeah, Lance Cummins."

"Were you there? Did you see it?"

"Not much really."

"I wish you would talk to me, Reggie. I swear, sometimes it's like pulling teeth."

"I'm okay, Mom. I'm home safe."

"Well you don't sound right."

"I'm fine."

"We heard that the suspect is still on the loose. If it's Lance, he lives right nearby."

"Mom, it *is* Lance."

"Stay in the house, Reggie. Make sure everything is locked up and don't answer the door."

"Okay, okay."

"Promise me you'll lock up as soon as we hang up."

"I promise."

"You know I was planning to stay with Grandma for another couple of days."

"Yeah."

"I can drive back right now if you need me. I could be there in a few hours."

"No, Mom. It's all right."

"By that time your father will be home from work anyway. I'm calling him just as soon as I hang up."

"Okay, Mom, 'bye."

"Goodbye, honey. I love you and be careful."

"Okay, 'bye."

Charles was alone on the screen. With his head tipped slightly, he adopted his know-it-all expression, and spoke directly to the audience. "It has become clear that the police completely mishandled this episode to the detriment of innocent children. How many we don't yet know. Even one is a cost too high. The police must act immediately to protect our children in the supposed safe haven of the school, even if it means putting their own safety at risk.

"Here, the police were paralyzed. They had an officer on the inside and instructed him to hold back and do nothing. In fact, they all did nothing except to surround the building for hours. But they were even ineffectual at their blockade. By the time they finally went in, the suspect had slipped right through their fingers. Lance Henry Cummins, possibly a mass murderer, is now at large.

"What's worse is that this all might have been prevented. We have indications that Lance Henry Cummins has had run-ins with the law before. He recently got off of probation for vandalism with a clean bill of health, so to speak. He visited a probation officer regularly for six months. And only two weeks ago, his probation officer

pronounced him essentially well adjusted. Our criminal justice system can't even recognize when a young man is so troubled that he might kill en masse. The authorities are quick to engage in unconscionable racial profiling, but they fail to perform the simple profiling that might have identified this troubled young man as a danger."

I sank onto the couch, arms hanging, brain plunged in a bog. My heart ached, bottomed in a cold well.

Rex rested his head on my knee and moaned.

Charles continued. "So, law enforcement is paralyzed and ineffectual. Criminal justice is blind and ineffective. Many of our politicians lack the vision or the guts to tackle the problem of rampant gun availability. Administrators ignore the epidemic bullying infecting our schools and making them a living hell for far too many students. Many, like Everett, fail even to avail themselves of the technology that would identify probable perpetrators. And our children pay the price. We'll be back after these messages."

Rex nuzzled under my hand. With a jerk of his head, he tried to nudge my hand into action. He wanted a pat on the head for its simple reassurance that I was okay. I didn't have it to give, but I stroked his head anyway. He nestled his chin on the couch against my leg and exhaled deeply.

Sometimes Lance would want to do things to Rex, demeaning things that would give Lance a laugh at Rex's expense. Like it didn't matter because he's just a dog. Like wiring his back legs together. Or blindfolding him. But I never let Lance do any of that stuff. Rex would never defend himself, so I stood up for him. Mostly Lance's ideas were not really dangerous or painful.

One time, though, we sort of got into a fight over it. Rex loves to chase tennis balls. Lance's idea of a good time

was to wait for a car to come, and then throw the ball out in front of it.

"We won't try to get him run over," Lance said. "We'll just see how close he'd get."

"No way, Lance."

"He's so fast, it'll be cool, like extreme fetch." Lance picked up a ball. "Canine kamikaze." He bounced the ball. Rex came to attention.

"Don't, Lance. He trusts me."

A car came around the corner. I could see Lance was going to do it. The car got closer. Lance waved the ball around. Rex was dancing around his legs, really excited, waiting for the throw. Lance raised his arm. I put my shoulder down and slammed into Lance's side. But too late, the ball was gone.

"Rex, stay!"

But he had been too excited to hear me. He blitzed after the ball. It skipped right in front of the car and Rex dashed after it. The driver slammed on his brakes. The angle cut off my view, so I couldn't see if he had cleared the corner of the metal monster or been crushed. I was afraid he was finished.

Lance and I were both on the ground. I raised my fist and pounded him in his sunken chest as hard as I could. He tried to laugh it off, but I think it really hurt him.

The driver yelled something. I could tell by the tone that it was scolding. Then I heard the clank of Rex's collar tags. He came running around the back of the car, ball sticking out of one side of his mouth, like a cigar, and tail straight up and wagging. I feel guilty about hitting Lance in the chest like that. But I still get a chill when I think of Rex being set up like that. And I still get mad.

I pounded the couch.

Rex took that as a potential for excitement. He carried a ball over and dropped it onto the couch. It rolled over to my hand. When I picked it up, his brow wrinkled into his seriously interested look. He watched me intensely when I picked up the ball, then he started whirling and hopping. Even though I didn't feel like it, I took him into the back yard and threw the ball for him a lot of times. He never gets tired, unless it's really hot out. He runs for it, carries it back in his jaunty way, and drops it at your feet. Watching Rex distracted me, for a little while.

"No more, boy." I walked toward the back door. Rex panted behind me, his tongue hanging out the side. As I opened the back door, the front doorbell rang.

Rex ran, barking.

I realized then that I hadn't locked it. Suddenly afraid it might be Lance and that he might let himself in, I ran, grabbed the knob, and turned the lock. But Lance would never come to the front door and ring the bell. Right out in the open. Still, I didn't relax. I was scared.

"Who is it?"

Rex grumbled a deep, threatening growl.

"I'm Officer Santana, Joe Santana, police department."

The guy from the TV?

"It's okay, Rex; it's okay." I opened the door a crack.

"I'm a neighbor of yours and I just wanted to check if everything is okay."

The first thing I saw was a police badge, shining in the sun. A young guy in a police uniform was standing there. He had buzzed black hair. He looked strong. His hands rested on his holster. It creaked.

I opened the door all the way. Rex went out and began checking out his shoes. He held his hand out. Rex smelled it, and began wagging his tail.

"Hi. It's Reggie, right?" He bent and patted Rex's head.

I nodded.

"Like I was saying, I'm Joe, Joe Santana. My wife and I, and our baby, moved in the neighborhood a few months ago. Anyway, I was at your school today. You know about Lance?"

I nodded.

"I've noticed you around since we moved in and I thought, since Lance lives around here, it would be good to check in, see how you're doing."

"I'm okay."

"You haven't seen him around here, have you?"

"No."

"Haven't heard from him?"

"No."

"Got any idea where he would go?"

"No."

"Like maybe there's an old hideout or something from when you guys were little?"

"No, there's nothing like that."

"Are your folks home?"

"No. My mother is out of town. My father's not home from work yet."

"Is there anyone you can stay with 'til your father gets home?"

"Not really. But he'll be home pretty soon anyway." But really I wasn't sure.

"That's good. And there'll probably be other officers or detectives here later. They're gearing up. I just wanted to

let you know that if you need anything, you can call me or come by, 24/7. Don't worry about what time it is."

He handed me his card. It had a gold police shield embossed on the front. "I wrote my home phone and address on the back. We're at 1140 Haverford. Not far, around the corner. Okay?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then. See you, Reggie."

I nodded. "Thanks."

"No problem. Remember, anytime."

I watched him walk down the path. It would've been nice if I could have asked him to come in. I looked at his card once more, then stuffed it in my pocket.

"Rex, come." I closed the door. And locked it. I started toward the kitchen to lock the back door.

The TV news was updating casualties and it froze me. Four teachers were dead. Mr. Angio, who I'd hoped to have for math next year. Ms. Whitestone, the other history teacher, Mrs. Clevenger, health, and Mr. Ramsey, P.E., all killed. The TV displayed their pictures, one at a time, then all four together. I was getting sick to my stomach. I knew they were getting closer to Paulette.

The custodian, Mr. Hackett, had died right there in the hallway. So that was his name. His picture joined the four, out of place somehow.

"It appears at this juncture that Claude Hackett was shot while attempting to save a student. Mr. Hackett, who died a hero, was 38 years old.

"Eight students are confirmed dead. Seventeen more have been wounded. Their conditions range from stable to critical. They have been taken to area hospitals. Among the confirmed dead are—"

I no longer could hear. The sounds wouldn't decipher. My head was splitting. I pressed my temples with both hands. The dreaded yearbook pictures began to appear on the screen, one by one, displayed large in the foreground then shrinking, each to its position in the background. Tears streamed and blurred my vision. Then her picture was on the screen. I ran around the room, a moth circling a light, going nowhere but with nowhere to stop. Around again, bumping here and there, like someone frantic to remember something, but there was nothing. Running again. Like a chicken without a head. Like a chicken.

Rex was running and hopping after me. He bumped my heel and I tripped against the couch. All their pictures were together on the screen. I ran into my room and launched onto my bed. Rex jumped up after me. I buried my head in the corner. He curled up next to me, guarding, but he couldn't protect me from what was in my head.

It couldn't be real. These kinds of things didn't happen to someone my age. I wasn't supposed to have consequences like this for anything I did, or didn't do. I was just walking around in my shell. Everyone knew that. In my shell. Alone, lonely but safe. What made Paulette's fate drop into my hands? She should have had someone else. Someone better, someone braver. Why did she have to have me? Why me?

I cried for a long time. And must have fallen asleep for a while. When I woke up, Rex was curled up on the floor next to my bed. My head was thick, stuffed with cotton. For a while, I didn't remember what had happened. When it first dawned on me, for only a moment, I thought it was a dream. Then the fog cleared. Reality stabbed.

I wandered into the living room. I changed channels until I found some family sitcom, smart-talking kids, dull parents and phony laughs. I couldn't stand to watch the TV, but I couldn't turn it off. I slumped into the couch, staring blindly at the moving images.

The front door creaked. I jumped with a rush of fear.

My father opened the door.

"Hey, Reggie." He was carrying a pizza box and our mail.

I wasn't sure I could speak. "Hey, Dad," came out kind of choked. He didn't notice.

He pushed the pizza box toward me. "Here, I brought you dinner. I already ate." He leafed through the mail. "Your mother said you know this kid they've been talking about, Lance Henry Cummins."

"Yeah, Dad, so do you. He lives around the corner."

"Bills, more bills and junk mail. I can't keep all the neighborhood kids straight. What happened?" He walked toward the TV.

"I don't know. I was in the hall and there was shooting. Then, there was Lance."

"Thank God you got out of there. I'm going to catch the news." He changed the channel and sat down as I got up. He never looked at me.

"Hey, boy." He patted Rex on the head. "Good dog, now go lie down."

I put the box on the kitchen counter and opened it up. The pizza didn't look like something you were supposed to eat. It was our usual kind, but I had no appetite. Rex did, though. He'd followed me into the kitchen and was looking up at me, ever hopeful. I bit off a piece of pizza and gave it to him. He wolfed it down. I ate a bite myself, but it

didn't go down right. Rex followed me to the back door where we keep his bowl. I filled it with his kibble. He actually likes that stuff.

Back in the living room, my father was sitting on the couch, staring at the TV. "Have you seen this? Twelve kids are dead. Still some in critical condition. Look, here are the parents."

I looked sideways at the TV. Mr. and Mrs. Cummins were standing there in front of a bunch of microphones next to some guy in a suit. They looked so haggard. Not at all like I thought of them, Mr. Self-Made and Ms. Golden Tennis. The suit guy stepped to the mikes.

"My name is Hank Westrom. I'm counsel for Mr. and Mrs. Cummins and am acting as their spokesman in this difficult time. Let me say first that they are still hoping against hope that there has been some kind of mistake and that Lance is not actually involved in all this. Should this hope fail, they want everybody to know that they had no idea, no suspicion whatsoever, that Lance might have been planning such a thing. And now, Mr. Cummins would like to say a few words." The suit guy held out his arm toward Mr. Cummins, then faded left.

Cameras clicked away.

"I'm Henry Cummins, Lance's father." He looked down for an instant. "To Lance I want to say, if you're watching and you're able, please give yourself up. Call 9–1–1 and tell them who you are and where you're at. It's for the best. To the school community and the families, I want you to know that we had no idea. If we could have prevented it, we would have. And we're so very, very sorry for what happened. We'd do anything, make any sacrifice, if only we could take it back. Sorry. Very—sorry . . ."

The suit guy stepped back up. "Okay. That's all for now." He put his arm around Mrs. Cummins and escorted Lance's parents away.

It was so weird seeing them on TV. I hadn't seen them for a long time. I didn't really like being over there. Once, a while back, Mr. Cummins had driven Lance and me to the mall. We were on the highway driving fast. Somebody was ahead of us, not going fast enough for Lance's father. He was tailgating and getting frustrated, getting closer, backing off a little, getting closer. There was nowhere to go around. He started flashing his lights and getting really hot. The other driver was slowing down even more.

"Look at this, the jerk's slowing down just to get me. I really hate when they do that passive aggressive crap."

He started honking and getting really close, the kind of closeness that makes you straight-arm the back of the seat and push with both feet.

"You're lucky I don't have my gun, you little jackass! Better learn how to drive before you come out on the road."

The other driver slowed even more, then signaled and pulled into the left-turn lane. As we went by, Lance's father put his arm out the window and jabbed his middle finger into the air a few times. "Jack-ass," he yelled as we zoomed by.

I looked at the driver as we sped on. The little old lady behind the wheel reminded me of my grandmother, maybe older. She looked straight ahead. Was she afraid a sideward glance might further antagonize her tormentor? I wondered how upset she'd be. How long before she could shake it off? Would she be afraid next time she had to go to the store? Would she want her husband to drive? What

if her husband was dead and she was alone like my grandmother? Isn't there room out there for a cautious, fearful grandma?

A commercial gave way to a newsroom studio with a shiny blonde facing the camera.

"Welcome to Right Angles. I'm your host, Deirdre Phelps. First up tonight is Sandra Meese of the Safe Schools Coalition. We'll be talking to Dr. Meese about her studies of profiling to identify violent youth before they kill."

The camera panned out, revealing another woman seated with the host.

"Tell us about your study, Dr. Meese."

"Well, Deirdre, I'm with the United States Secret Service. In the early nineties, in our efforts to protect the President, we began studying every assassination attempt in American history. Using those studies we developed a usable profile to help protect the President. Several years ago, during a rash of school shootings, we decided to apply our expertise to see if profiling could help as a preventative measure against school killings."

"So you studied all incidents of school violence?"

"No, all violence is too broad. We limited our study to all incidents of school killings and attempted killings going back to 1974."

"I didn't realize these things went back that far."

"Oh, yes. We studied 37 incidents involving 41 attackers."

"What does the profile look like?"

"Well, Deirdre, what we found is that there is no usable profile."

"But Doctor, haven't all of the incidents involved white males?"

"No. Nearly 25 per cent were not white. The most one can say is that a great majority has been boys."

"Haven't most been from troubled homes?"

"No. They are all over the board. They come from intact homes with strong community ties, they come from unstable foster situations."

"What about their status as outcasts or loners and victims of bullying?"

"It's not supported by the data. Some have been popular, some have been isolated. Again, all over the board."

"What about failing or slipping grades and withdrawing from friends and family?"

"No, again. There is simply no pattern based on slumping school performance, attitude or social interaction."

"What about dress, you know, the proverbial black trench coats? Or fascination with guns?"

"No, Deirdre. In fact, those factors illustrate the dangers of profiling. In this context, an attempt at profiling results in both false positives and false negatives. In other words, many students who pose no threat would be labeled and stigmatized unfairly, while those that posed a real threat would most often go undetected."

"Aren't there any common factors?

"Oh, yes, very significant ones. Most attackers have shown signs of depression. Perhaps most important for prevention, though, is that most planned their violence for quite a while. And in more than three-quarters of cases, they told someone about it beforehand."

My heart skipped.

"Putting those two factors together gives us the best chance for prevention because, if they are planning, there is a window of time to intervene. And if they are telling

others, that provides an opportunity for someone to step forward."

It was like she was pointing at me. I was the one Lance had told. I was the one who could have come forward. I was the one who could have prevented the whole thing. But I hadn't. I closed my eyes. Paulette's quivering face filled the darkness. And Lance's grotesque, mocking smile.

I walked slowly to my bedroom, head down, and I didn't stop until I banged it into the wall. Again and again.

CHAPTER FIVE

When my father stuck his head in my room, I think I was asleep at my computer.

"Come on, Reggie, time for bed. It's been a tough day."

"Yeah, Dad. I'm shutting it down right now."

"Okay, goodnight."

"Night."

But when I went to shut it down, I noticed the e-mail message indicator. A chill came with the thought that it might be Lance, reaching out through cyberspace. I clicked.

The message line said "From: CyberTimeSurfing Institute; Subject: Monday Redux."

What the heck was this? Some come-on for a virus? I vowed not to open any attachments. But what could a Monday Redux be? The word sounded familiar, but I had no idea what it meant. I clicked.

To: Reginald Poppel

I have the power to let you have a do-over, today redux. A chance to go back and stop it. I'm forbidden to allow Cyber-TimeSurfing that might affect the past, but I can't let today stand. I guess you can call me a bit of a maverick. They'll terminate me if they find out. But it's still Monday, so can it really be considered the past yet?

You're going to have a chance to redo this day. You don't need to know how. It's just science. All you have to know is that at midnight tonight, I will make sure a wormhole opens in your hallway. It will be open only briefly, so don't hesitate. All you have to do is walk through the mouth of wavy blue light. It'll take you back in time 18 hours, to six this morning. You can redo the morning, rego to school, relive the day, knowing what you know now. You've got the chance. Make of it what you will.

Good luck, Maverick

I never heard anything so crazy. Who would send me something like this? Lance? Did he find a computer somewhere and send this to continue tormenting me? Maybe it would be traceable and I should tell Officer Santana. Or maybe it's someone else trying to needle me. This was bull.

I pulled the message back up to re-read it. I could "rego". That choice of words could not have been coincidental. I could relive the day, knowing what I know now. What did I know? That Lance was serious when he talked about an attack at Everett. That he did it after second period. The gun barrel staring at me like a vacant eye. Lance's crazed calm. Paulette's pleading face. The red flow over her white wrist. Lance ducking into the Media Room.

The sprinklers' rain. The blare. Mr. Baldacci's soundless mouthing. Lance's father had said he would do anything to take it back. Would I? If I could stop Lance, save Paulette and everybody, would I be released from this pain?

That thought brought the first moment of peace I'd had since Lance shot away "ordinary." Maybe I could even be a hero. I pictured people gathering around, patting me on the back. Recognizing me. "There goes Rego, he stopped Lance." The principal or mayor would boom, "We will be forever indebted to him for saving so many lives."

People love bravery. But there was no point thinking about that crap. The message sitting on my screen was somebody's sick joke—Lance or somebody who witnessed my humiliation, striking at my wound. Hero? Right. By the time school was open again, I'd be recognized all right. Recognized forever as what I showed myself to be, a coward. "There goes Rego, he ran away." Or worse, suspected of having been in on it. But most likely, I realized, it would be both. Some would see me as a coward and others would see me as a killer, the bad feelings, the suspicions, blending shapelessly until I was viewed as the carrier of some nameless contagion. If only I could go back, by saving everybody, I could save myself.

The corner of the monitor screen said 10:52. Enough of this dreaming garbage. I was going to have to deal with all of it. The guilt, the rejection, the whole thing, every day. I might as well start now by replying to the creep who was harassing me with this crap. I didn't want to be afraid that it might further antagonize my tormentor.

I hit "reply" and keyed in, "Big joke. Very funny. You should be proud." That was too weak. I didn't send it. I needed to think of something with real impact.

I spun my chair away from the desk and walked into the hallway. What an absurd idea that a wormhole, wavy, blue light, would appear right there outside my room. I headed into the bathroom and locked the door. I always do. The thought of anyone walking in on me makes me squirm.

While I was in the bathroom, Rex barked. It was a little weird, because he doesn't bark at nothing like some dogs. Maybe it was just the house creaking. Then he did it again, but this time it was a series of barks running together, sounding provoked. I pictured the hair raised on his neck and back.

I hurried, but some things can only be hurried up to a point, so by the time I was in a position to go check it out, Rex had stopped barking. That was weird, too, and I was getting spooked. I was glad my father was home.

I cracked the bathroom door to peek out, but was blinded to the hallway's darkness by the bright white of the bathroom light. I felt like a fool, peering around in my own house, especially since Rex was quiet. I switched off the bathroom light and swung the door wide.

I was hit by a chilly breeze. What was up with that?

Rex was standing in front of my bedroom, staring down at the crack between the floor and the door. I hadn't closed my door, had I? An unsettled feeling spread through me.

I flipped the hall light on. The cold wind raised bumps on my arms. I wandered into the kitchen, Rex trotting ahead. He led me to the back door. Wide open.

Another kind of chill froze me still. I had never gotten around to locking the back door. I looked behind me. Nothing there. By now I was thoroughly freaked.

Rex was hopping around me and groaning.

I turned on the outside light and took a tentative look out there. The light had a short range. The halo right around me was bright and I could see the edge of the bushes. A short distance beyond that, all was shrouded. Other shapes loomed, menacing, too indistinct to identify. Everything else was total darkness. I felt as though I was spotlighting myself for anything lurking out there. I listened for a moment. All was quiet. I came back in, telling myself it was only the wind and that a gust had blown the door open. I closed it against the cold. This time I locked it.

I tried to tell myself the same thing about my bedroom door. But I knew better. A wind blowing in through the back door would have blown my door open, not closed. Maybe I had closed it without thinking. Maybe.

Rex was still hopping and moaning. His energy was spooking me even more. I felt like I was in a scary movie where the audience can't believe some stupid character is going to the one place he shouldn't. But I felt stupid being scared in my own house. Scared by the wind. Scared by the door.

I listened at my door. Only silence.

I reached for the knob. My jumpy fingers gripped it and turned. I opened the door a crack and through the skinny opening saw the wall and the head of my bed, covers wrinkled over the pillow. All was still. I pushed the door wider, revealing the window, dark above my bed, and the poster of my favorite group, The J/Less See. I swung it open all the way to see my desk against the wall on the right. I exhaled, relieved that no one was there, and walked in.

A hand gripped my shoulder from behind. I jumped, an electric tingle shot up my neck and spread across my scalp.

I swung around to see—Lance, smiling diabolically from behind the door.

"Sur-prise. Hey, Rego, what's got you so jumpy?"

Heavy in his right hand hung a dull, silver handgun.

"Lance, damn," was all I could muster.

"You're not happy to see me?" He motioned me farther into my own room and closed the door. "You should be more careful about leaving your doors unlocked, especially with the trash that's walking around these days." He slumped into my desk chair, back to the computer.

"Why'd you do it, Lance?"

I glanced at my monitor, rolling and scrolling with my undulating shark screensaver. Had Lance seen the e-mail before the prowling shark covered it?

"To set things right."

"You think you set things right today? Like with Paulette?"

"Hey, don't make out like she was some goddess or something just 'cause she's dead. She was no angel and you know it. She was a stuck-up bitch like the rest. And she deserved it."

The more worked up Lance got, the more his shoulders twitched. A little white spit gathered in the corner of his mouth. The gun seemed not so dull.

"Okay. Okay. You're gonna wake my father up." I sat on my bed hoping I could calm the beast.

"I'm cool."

"How'd you get out of there, anyway?"

"I ditched my weapons and ran down the hallway toward the nurse. I hadn't been down there so nobody knew I was the one. I joined a crowd, just melted into the

scene, got to my car and took off. Ditched my car at a bus stop to throw them off, like I had hopped a bus. Had my bike on the rack. Rode back and ditched the bike and here I am. Lucky you."

"What are you gonna do now?"

"I've got a little cash. I'll become one of those poor teenage runaways. Blend into the street in some city. But you don't want to know which one, 'cause if I tell you, I'll have to kill you." He chuckled.

I didn't. The gun rested in his lap.

"You know, Rego, it was a real rush. The power. It's unbelievable. It's so real. Life and death, right there, you decide. And exposing those hallowed halls for the nightmares they really are."

"They're my nightmares now, Lance. Wherever I go."

"Come on, Rego. You didn't think I was going to shoot you?"

"Either way I lose. Never be the same."

"You're just into it wrong. You've got to see it as liberating. You're not seeing the art, the beauty of cold justice. The symmetry. The other side. You know, the dark side was always there. I made the pretenders look at it; they're not pretending anymore."

"Sometimes pretending let's you be."

"What're you talking about?"

"Like you said, now I can't pretend anymore. I ran away. Crawled to Adams to curl up and hide."

"Don't be that way, Rego." Lance sat up, his shoulders hopping again. "That pisses me off. If you want to stand up, then stand up. Nobody's making you cower. Just do it, Rego."

"Do what?"

"Anything. But do something. Don't always be watching, crawling. Go ahead, take me out right now."

He hadn't moved the gun, heavy on his lap. He didn't really believe I would take up that challenge.

I didn't.

"You could have been in on it with me. Then we could both be heading out for the street. You could come with me anyway. It'll be cool."

I looked down. What he said about doing something, anything, hurt. He was right about that. But it was my life. And there was a huge gulf between us. Nothing he could say would make me want to join with him. My pain and his plan were not in the same universe, no overlap, no edges touching.

"That makes no sense, " I said.

"Think about it, man. Hey, what time is it?"

"Eleven-thirty."

"Good. Got plenty of time. Where's your remote? I want to see what they're saying about me."

What did he mean? Plenty of time for what? I picked up the remote from the nightstand and tossed it to him. He swiveled my chair around to face the small TV at the L-part of my desk and clicked 'til he found news.

How was I going to get out of this? Would he really just leave? Or would he decide he had already told me too much about his plan? His ridiculous plan. Every cop, every storeowner, everybody would have his face etched in their minds. Every newspaper would plaster his picture on the front page. Every TV news show would lead with his face. He'd be on every front porch, in every living room, at every newsstand on every corner.

Proving me right, the TV displayed Lance's latest school picture.

"Check it out." Lance was actually having fun.

In the picture he sat slightly sideways, against a mottled blue background, hair pushed just so to the side. His shirt, kind of a preppy look, hung from his bony shoulders. I imagined I could make out the left chest hollow through his shirt. How could someone who sat still for a school picture think of himself as a rebel? How could a person who sat and smiled when cued be the same person who killed and sneered when the bell rang?

"Hey, I didn't know there was a cop in the school. Did you know that, Rego?"

They were playing the Santana interview. Lance was riveted.

Maybe if I pretended to be asleep he would just leave. Or would he wake me up to see if I was going along on Lance's Big Adventure. Would he shoot me when I said no?

If only the e-mail were true. What if? A dream from inside a shell. But what would I do with a second chance? Break out of my shell? Do something? Stop him?

I daydreamed that Camilla was fawning over me, arms around my neck. People in the background muttered things that meant hero. I seemed bigger. A three-striped ribbon crossed my chest from shoulder to waist. Pats on the back. I smiled. People said hello, hoping I'd notice them. Paulette curtsied.

"Earth to Rego. Where are you, man?"

"What?"

"I was talking to you, and you were, like, out of it."

"Oh, sorry."

"Did you know that cop was there?"

"Yeah, I heard."

"Unbelievable. I might have come up against him. You know things could have turned out better."

"Better? If you'd gone against the police?"

"No, I mean if that bomb had gone off at the front door. All it did was smoke. And if I hadn't run out of ammo. I wish I could have hidden ammo right where I ran out. Then I could have boosted my total."

He was unbelievably twisted, sick, but I couldn't say that. I didn't want to see those shoulders start twitching. "Too bad," was all I could think of.

"But there was no way to know exactly where I'd run out of ammo. You know, it depended on how many jocks, preps, low-lifes, hoppers, nerds, and bitches I ran into. Now, if I could do it all over again," his smile mocking, "knowing exactly where I would run out, I could hide some more. I'd skip the bomb, too much trouble. I could even stash my gun right in the building. Then by the time the bell rang, I'd be waiting, instead of having to go out to my car."

"You went all the way out to your car?"

"Yeah. I had to. I share my locker with that guy Steve. I couldn't leave guns in there. So I cut second period and went out to my car to get everything. When I set the bomb at the front door, it was so weird, nobody paid any attention. But the bomb was just a waste of time. Oh, well," he shrugged overdramatically, "too bad there're no do-overs, right, Rego?"

"Yeah, right." But what if somehow there were?

Lance changed the channel.

One of those "presidential hopefuls" was being interviewed. "Yes, our culture has lost meaning for our youth. And entertainment interests have rushed into the void, replacing meaning with meanness. Our kids spend hour upon hour engrossed in some form of video, movies, games, TV. During that time they see literally hundreds of killings."

"Is it your position that media causes all this violence?"

"Not alone, but it's a contributing cause. Make no mistake about it, playing games where you shoot a human figure and watch the blood flow clearly desensitizes the player. Removes an innate hesitancy, first discovered by the military. Target practice at human shapes makes it easier for soldiers to shoot in combat."

I knew the e-mail wasn't real. No wormhole would open at my bedroom door. There just aren't any do-overs. No chance redux. But what if there were? I couldn't let it appear, then disappear, with no one to notice it. That would be really ridiculous. If this wormhole thing actually opened, I had to be there. If it didn't, so what. No one would ever have to know I fell for it. So I had to be in the hallway at midnight just in case. What would it look like, wavy blue light right outside my door?

But how was I going to get rid of Lance and that big silver gun?

"So, what's your plan, Lance?"

"I already told you, it's the street, man."

"How long you gonna hang out here?"

"Why? You thinkin' of coming with me?"

"No, it ain't happenin'."

"That's cool. You do what you want. Be easier for me to blend in by myself anyway."

"So when you headin' out?"

"Rush hour, Rego. I want to be downtown for the morning rush. So I'll be chillin' here for a while. You got any tape?"

"What kind of tape?"

"Like duct tape."

"Probably. What for?"

"Well, Rego, when I go, I can't leave you walking around. I've got to have a head start. So I figure you'll write a note to Daddy how you went to school early. I'll tape you all up and leave you in the garage. No one will find you for hours. But you'll live." He smiled. "It's either the tape or this." He held up the gun.

"I can find tape. No sweat." His tape scheme was a definite relief, and an opportunity for me.

The computer clock said "11:57."

"I'll go look for some now," I said.

"Where you gonna look?"

"In the kitchen, we have a drawer full of stuff. And, if it's not in there, then in the washroom cupboard."

"You won't do anything stupid, right?"

"No, of course not."

"Don't be thinkin' you're gonna make any calls, 'cause I'll be checking the phone. Toss it over here."

I took the phone off my nightstand, handed it to him and walked to the door.

Rex stretched, gazed over at me, then followed.

I closed the door behind me and glanced down the hallway, feeling a little foolish even for hoping. No blue light.

My watch said "11:58."

I headed for the kitchen and its catchall drawer. I knew there was no duct tape in there, but I needed to carry on

the charade for two more minutes. I rummaged around in the drawer making just enough noise for Lance to hear should he have his ear pressed to the door. I was surprised to find some masking tape. Lance might be satisfied with that, and after it turned out there was no wormhole, I needed him to be satisfied. That was the only way this home invasion could turn out okay, with me taped in the garage and my father sleeping through the whole thing.

I glanced at my watch. "11:59."

I grabbed the masking tape and went back into the hall. My bedroom door was still closed.

The whole wormhole deal was somebody's idea of a joke. Who was I kidding? There would be no second chance for me. Things were never going to be the same, no matter how hard I wished they would. I told myself I had to let go of the fantasy redux and focus on what was real. I could still maybe help them catch Lance. But how? What could I do taped up in the garage? Reach a phone? Dial with my nose or tongue? Maybe press the garage door opener over and over until someone came? That all sucked. Once I was taped, he'd be long gone. Maybe he would put the gun down and I could jump him.

Rex curled up in front of my door, resigned to the fact that, once again, I was doing something that to him made absolutely no sense. I was just standing in the hall.

I looked at my watch again, still hopeful, I guess, and counted down the seconds to—MIDNIGHT.

Way down the dark hall, by the bathroom, I thought I could see a faint glimmer, the kind you can see only out of the corner of your eye. When I looked straight at it, it seemed to disappear, but if I looked away I thought I could

see something. The glimmer appeared brighter, no doubt about it, and my self-doubts swelled.

A vertical oval of wavy, electric blue light at the far end of the hall shimmered brighter and brighter by degrees, throwing off a glow onto the hallway walls. The neon blue oval expanded toward me, like an animated stretching accordion, and stopped at my feet.

I could see all the way down the vibrant blue tube, rippling inside, like heat waves rising from pavement in summer. Through the undulation, there was light at the end of the tunnel. Not blue light. It was daylight. Morning light.

The wormhole was real. Or I was crazy.

I edged my hand into the mouth of the wormhole. It looked rippled, but when I pulled it out, it was normal. I thrust my whole arm in there and moved it around, watching it all wavy. I pulled it back. Normal. Like a little kid holding a big present on a cliff, I felt too giddy to stand still, too scared to move.

My bedroom door was still closed. Was I really going to do this? Should I risk it? I felt clammy and shaky, like my turn to get on the roller coaster. What if the wormhole took me somewhere else? To a prison, a trap I could never escape? Or to some hell? But wasn't that what I deserved for choosing Paulette?

This whole thing was crazy. My insides were jumping and my hands were cold. I really didn't want to go. At that moment I wished to slink away to the safety of my room. Into my shell. It would have been my old comfortable way, my own rut. I missed it. But I couldn't live with things the way they were. That rut, as much as I always wished I could break out, had morphed. I couldn't return to that rut. It no longer existed. My own room wasn't safe, with

Lance and his gun in there. I saw then there was no choice. I couldn't turn my face from all that death. I couldn't recoil into my shell—it no longer provided refuge.

I looked back at my door once more. I might not see that place again. Never be the same. I held my breath and stepped into the oval.

My feet disappeared in the blue fog at the floor of the tunnel. Everything else was wavy. My hands, my legs and the path ahead.

Through the exit at the other end of the wormhole, I could see the bathroom, rippling through the waves of blue. The light seemed foggy to the sides and made me a little cross-eyed. I couldn't tell how deep it was or see the walls of our hallway. The wormhole had a scent to it, like mint candy, but electric. I started carefully, but as I gained confidence, I walked faster. I was almost there, almost to the morning light. Maybe no hell waited, maybe just Monday morning. Monday redux.

But something grabbed me from behind. A grip on my shoulder pulled me, twirled me around and I fell into the blue, neon fog. From the floor of the wormhole, I saw Lance running ahead, right through the other end. I panicked at being submerged in that fog and at the sense of being left behind.

"Don't hesitate," Maverick's message had said. What if the wormhole closed before I could get through? Limbo, forever stuck in some netherworld?

I got up and ran out the other end and into the morning light. For only a moment, the relief of escaping the tunnel calmed me and eased my chest. But where was Lance?

Rex whined at my bedroom door and I knew. As I grasped the doorknob, the wavy oval of light flickered

then vanished, leaving for an instant an afterimage in blue, and a faint odor of mint.

Lance was pacing around my room, almost hopping. His shoulders were.

"This is unbelievable." He stopped to check my reaction. "Is this real, or am I crazy?"

Both, I thought, but didn't say it. Lance was agitated and that heavy gun bobbed in his hand with every bounce of his arm.

"This is too good. When I saw that e-mail on your computer, I didn't believe it. Just some hacker joke, right? But then I figured, what the hell, I've got nothing to lose, I'm waiting around here anyway. And what if it was true?"

"So you did see my e-mail."

"Yeah. Didn't you notice when I said 'do-overs'? That was no accident. I still don't know if I really believe it, but look outside. It's morning. And look your computer says it's 6:03 A.M. One second after midnight, it's six in the morning. Do you believe this, Rego?"

I really did and the image of Paulette, still cozy and safe in her bed, warmed me. "Yeah, I believe it."

"So who's this Maverick guy?"

"I don't know. Never knew anything about him 'til I got the e-mail."

"From nowhere? Just like that?" He snapped his fingers.

"Yeah, from nowhere."

"So, you mean, they're out there?" He made his voice sound spooky.

"I guess."

"You feel any different?"

"Not really. Well, the pain is easing."

"What pain? You hurt, Rego?"

"No. I'm talking about the pain in my gut and my head from everything that happened yesterday, I mean, today. Whatever, it's like it has been erased."

"Like none of it has happened—yet?"

My clock radio screeched. "So, I'm a big fan, and also this big time radio personality, so I go up to her. She's sitting there with some woman. I say, 'Hi, Deborah—."

I slap down on snooze. Definitely Monday all over again.

"You got another chance, Lance."

"Yeah, a blitz redux."

"No, I mean you've got a clean slate. You don't have to run to the streets. You don't have to—kill."

"Wrong, I'm not going to miss my big chance to wield the cold steel of justice."

"Come on, it doesn't make justice. None of those kids deserve to die."

"Forget it, Rego. I'm doing it again, this time I'm doing it better. And I was thinking that if you joined me, we could really make some noise."

"You don't need to do it again. You already know how it feels."

"Yeah," Lance slowed down, "but they don't know how it feels."

"So what. They don't matter. And you wouldn't have to run away and leave your car and your music and all your stuff."

"I don't care about any of that. The avenger has to be on the run. Outlaw avenger."

"That's stupid, Lance. This isn't some game."

"Life's a game. Didn't anyone ever tell you that?"

"No. These are real people. It's not your place."

"Whose then? God's?"

I knew I was losing him. "They'll catch you. Then what?"

"That's the chance I take to be on the edge."

"Don't do it, Lance. At least not today. Think about it. You can always decide to do it another time."

"No, Rego. You'll rat me out if I wait around. And that raises a problem. I have to deal with you now."

I backed away.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to shoot you right here. I'm going to put a choice down for you. Either you join me and we really score and then hit the road or—you go against me. See if you can stop me. It'll be the greatest game ever. Real life. And real death."

"No, Lance. Don't do this."

"Come on, Rego, what'll it be?"

"I don't want to choose. Don't make me."

"Your only choice is to choose, Rego. Act up. Do something. Get up on your hind legs and choose."

I'd never join him. And having faced the Paulette choice still haunted me. "No, Lance. I don't like those choices."

He pointed the gun at Rex. "I know you can make a choice, Rego. Like whether Rex burns or walks."

"Don't." It all closed in on me.

"I don't have a lot of time. What's it gonna be?"

"I'm against you." I felt cold.

"Good. I like that. You've always been a willing sort of loser. But you'll make it a little more interesting." He stood. "Get your game face on, Rego." He sneered. "Ready, set, go."

He strolled out of my room.

After he was out the back door, I ran to the front door and fetched the newspaper. The banner said "Monday."

So I was going to have a second chance. As the feelings of failure from yesterday, no, from today the first time, flaked off, the idea that Paulette and all the rest were still alive thrilled me. The weight was lifted.

But now what? I picked up the phone, dialed 9–1–, then hung up. How would it play out? Lance would deny everything and make up some story. They'd search him and find no weapons because he would have hidden them all. Then they'd think I made it all up. Everybody would think I was a rat and my life would suck even more than it already did, with no hope of breaking out. The daydream images returned. But this time Camilla didn't even notice my existence. She turned her back. The people in the background whispered sarcastic jeers, sharp and cutting. Pats on the back turned to pushes until my face pressed against the cold, hard locker. And Lance would probably still do it some other day anyway. But then I'd be on his list.

Or I could stop him myself. I would stop him myself. The willing loser? We'd see about that. I'd make him sorry.

He told me what he intended to do. He had said if he could do it all again, he would hide weapons in school. Not have to go out to his car. And hide ammo to reload because now he would know exactly where he would run out. I could beat him to where he stashed his guns and stop him. He wasn't that tough. I remembered when I hit him in the chest. That had hurt him. I could hit him again. Camilla's smile beamed in my imagination.

But where would he hide his guns? Not his locker. He had said that. And not in his car. He'd have to hide them someplace rarely visited but never locked. Somewhere he was familiar with. Somewhere no one would question him about. The Media Room. Definitely. He always liked to

work with the equipment. It was perfect for him. Broken video equipment, random parts, old posters, and yellowing decorations were piled on every surface. Metal racks lined the walls and two center aisles were littered with the old stuff. Several carts in the front held the working stuff. He could hide his weapons in the back amid the clutter no one ever bothered with. And he had gone into the Media Room right after—Paulette. With the siren screaming and sprinklers spraying, he had ducked into the Media Room. I pulled myself away from the image, a memory of something that hadn't even happened yet. And it wasn't going to.

CHAPTER SIX

My clock radio screamed again. I turned it off. I had a strange feeling. I think it was optimism. Today, the replay, was not going to be ordinary.

Already, everything was different. I was a mass of nerves. Too hyped to even take a shower, I paced, nearly hopped, around my room. If the school weren't still locked up, I would have run there. But it was, so I had to contain myself. I was nervous, which was not unusual. But usually it would be a dread feeling that went along with not wanting to do something. Usually I would dream about escape when I had that feeling. This morning, I didn't even think about escape. I had to do it. I even felt like I could. I would do it. I would succeed. I would show myself to be special. This optimistic nervousness was new and so much better than the old dread anxiety. So much better than the depths I had suffered last night. Better even than the old "ordinary."

I didn't change my clothes. I kept on the stuff I bought because I had been worried about what somebody else would say. I vowed that next time I went shopping, I would pick something different, just because it was different.

I brushed my hair down in front, like always. But, for the first time ever, it seemed it was covering my face too much.

I couldn't eat. But I'd still do my best and it would be good enough.

I scratched Rex's ear and patted his head. "See ya later, boy."

Ordinarily I walk to school. This morning I race-walked, as though I was late for something I couldn't be late for. But I couldn't slow down. I actually tried a few times, but my body could operate only one way.

I kept looking around for Lance's car with the bike on the roof rack. I never saw it.

When I got into the main building, I saw some guys in the hall. "Hi." I said. Was I too loud?

"Hey, Rego."

Got to my locker. "Hi, Nick."

"Hey, how you doin' Rego?"

"Great."

"All right. Hey, see you later, man."

"Yeah, later."

I was so hyped that by the time the gorilla walked by, I was already heading down the hall. No locker-face this time.

Sitting in first period, I watched Camilla. Every action was the same as yester—I mean today, the first time.

"Okay, people—" Mr. Baldacci went into his routine with the outlines.

I made up my mind to not be so stupid. This time when Camilla smiled, I was going to smile back.

When she turned, she smiled, just the same. Those little corner dimples appeared for me. This time I smiled back. Just for a second, then I looked down. She turned back. I had probably grinned like a hyena. But it wasn't such a big deal. And it was a huge deal. And it felt good.

When first period ended, I ran out into the hall. It was crowded and everyone was moving so slowly I couldn't stand it. I started to weave my way through.

"Excuse me. Excuse me," I said as I worked through the crowd. I could feel the reactions, like "what's his problem?"

When I got to a clearing I ran down to the Media Room. I stopped outside to listen. All was quiet. I went in and straight to the back. I looked on the racks for Lance's stash. I couldn't find anything. What if I had guessed wrong? I was getting frantic. The bell would ring any second and I'd be late to second period. They might send me to the office or something. I was shoving old equipment around on shelf after shelf. Pieces were falling, making a racket. I reached to the back of a bottom rack against the wall and pushed some old tape player. It didn't move right. Something was resisting. I rummaged further.

I knew it the moment my hand bumped it. It moved heavier than the video equipment, as though it were a chunk of solid steel. I pulled it out of the junk. Heavy and cold. Not the handgun, it was the one that had killed Paulette while I stood by. But now she was alive and fine and she would stay that way. I put it on a different rack, one in the middle, pushed it to the back, and piled stuff on top of it.

I ran out of the Media Room and headed for the stairway, bounding the first three steps as the bell rang. I ran all

the way to class, sliding as I reached the doorway and catching the door as it was closing.

"Glad you could make it, Reggie. Please take your seat."

By the time Ms. Flowers assigned the poem, my stomach muscles were in a twisted cramp. The weight of that gun settled on me and started to sink in. It was so hard and cold, and heavy. So undeniable. Final.

I pulled out a sheet of paper. Everyone was working. All I could think of was what would happen at the end of second period. The second hand on the clock looked supercharged. If I screwed this up, I'd be back to loser. And how many would pay? I started to sweat. Things would never be the same. Last night's feelings returned like a thundercloud blotting out the sun, icy wind slapping. I shuddered, cold and sweating.

I started writing.

Never be the same,
Never be the same.
Ever see the blame,
Whenever see the name Lance.

I had finished my poem. That was it. That was all I could write, or even think.

I looked at the clock. Still five minutes to go. I stood.

"Take your seat, Reggie."

I walked up the aisle.

"Reggie?"

I handed her the poem.

"I've got to go." I walked out.

The class murmured.

I couldn't have waited any longer. I had to be sure I would get there before Lance. Otherwise, I was sunk.

I skipped down the stairs. The hall was empty. I went carefully toward the Media Room. Still no one. I opened the door and stuck my head in. I'd done it. I'd beaten Lance to the stash. Now all I had to do was wait and confront him. He'd never get into the Media Room. The willing loser was going to stop him. I closed the door.

"I'm impressed," Lance said.

I jumped.

"You figured out my hiding place. Very impressive. Were you planning to fight me for the gun? That might work. But risky business there, Rego. Not well thought out." He pulled the handgun out of his backpack. It was that same dull silver one.

I stared. "Where. . . ?"

He waved it around. "I had this little beauty in my locker."

"But Steve shares—"

"Surprise, Rego. Steve is absent today. Did I forget to mention that last night? Too bad, Rego. Nice try, but now the game is over. You lose." He pointed the gun at my face. "Get out of the way, loser."

My heart fell off the cliff. All my stupid planning had been a game, just like Lance said, and I'd lost. Not just for myself. How many others?

The bell rang. For an instant, Lance looked concerned. A crack in his self-assurance. Obviously, he'd expected to have that big weapon ready by the time the hall filled with kids. But he wasn't ready. Soon he'd find that the gun wasn't where he left it.

The first kids spilled into the hallway.

Lance rushed into the Media Room, right to his spot. "What the—?"

He pushed and threw equipment around. He was having a tantrum.

"Damn it, Rego. I'm gonna kill you." He was still throwing things.

That's when I saw Paulette coming down the hall. Kids were everywhere by then.

"No, run!" I yelled. "Run! Run!"

They just kept walking, looking at me like I was crazy.

"He's got a gun!"

Lance rushed back into the hallway just as Paulette got up next to me. Just like last time.

He raised the handgun, holding it sideways, and pointed at my chest. "You suck, Rego. But I found it anyway." The other weapon hung heavy in his left hand. Then he noticed Paulette and snickered. "Look's like we're right back where we started. And you blew it again."

I couldn't answer. Just like last time.

"How'd that go? Something like, I'll give you a choice. Her or you. But you better choose fast because this time I'm cutting you no slack."

Paulette whimpered.

Kids were coming out of a classroom across the hall, oblivious to everything. Suddenly, Lance turned toward them and fired, and fired, and fired. It was so loud it made me cringe. And they never saw it coming. Two fell to the ground. The others scattered. The screams started. The desperate, wild commotion of panic. Squirrels before a speeding car, unable to fathom its course.

He turned back to me. "Time's up, Rego. You're too slow. Just like last time. But this time, I'm taking you both. Ladies first."

He turned on Paulette. I saw his finger squeeze the trigger. I heard the terribly loud report. But as he fired, the custodian seemed to appear from nowhere. He dove, an athlete by need, and intercepted the bullet meant for Paulette.

"Nice gesture." Lance turned to me, gun aimed at my face.

"Drop it! Police!" came from behind Lance.

Lance turned. Officer Santana was in his shooting stance, pointing his weapon at Lance.

Lance looked back to me. "It's over, Rego." After that everything happened so fast. Lance whipped his handgun around and fired. My ears were still ringing, but it was so loud it echoed in my head. Then it seemed to join with other loud cracks until I was stunned deaf.

Officer Santana buckled with one hit, then flew backwards with one in the chest and lay on the floor.

I don't know how many shots had been fired, but when it finally quieted I found myself sitting, leaning against the wall. That big weapon I hid, so clever I was, lay on the floor next to my leg.

Paulette stood alone, quaking, the lone, spindly tree spared by the tornado. Her hands covered her mouth. The slumped custodian covered her feet.

Lance was crumpled on the floor, bleeding. The heat seemed gone. His shoulders twitched once and he rattled out a single long breath. Then he moved no more.

A short distance away, Officer Santana lay sprawled and still. The way he lay, I could see over the bottom of his shoes to a huge red stain spreading on his chest.

Soon teachers and staff flooded into the hall.

"Call 9–1–1!" someone yelled.

A crowd gathered around Officer Santana. Someone walked Paulette away. People attended to the custodian. Soon the crowd around Lance and me was so thick that I couldn't see Officer Santana anymore.

"Are you hurt?" someone said to me.

"I don't think so."

"Good. Just relax then."

I had no choice. I was limp.

Distant sirens wailed, closer and closer, until they whooped to a stop right outside. Then police and paramedics swarmed.

An ambulance guy squatted next to me.

"Did you get hit?"

"No."

"Knocked down?"

"I don't know."

"Did you hit your head?"

"I don't think so."

"Let me see." He felt around my head and neck. "Any pain?"

"No."

"What's your name?"

"Reginald Poppel."

"Where are you, Reginald?"

"What?"

"Just checking your mental faculties. Do you know where you are?"

"In school."

"What school?" He checked my eyes and focus.

"Everett."

"What day is it?"

This one I'd had two chances at. "Monday."

He turned to a policeman. "He's okay to move."

The policeman held me under one arm and led me past the crowds working around Lance, the custodian and Officer Santana. I started shaking as he walked me outside and sat me in the back seat of his car. The helicopters buzzed.

"You look a little chilled. Here, lean forward." He wrapped a blanket around me. "You okay?"

I nodded but I wasn't okay. I screwed up big time. I thought I could handle things. I thought I could figure things out, but I had gotten only as far as figuring out his hiding place. It hadn't even dawned on me that there would be more. And he had been a step ahead of me all along. He had known it. He had planted that stuff about sharing the locker, knowing that Steve's absence would be critical. It was weird. I had lost, but he was sprawled in a pool.

As I sat wrapped in a police blanket, suffering under the weight of my own failure, it never dawned on me that there was still more I failed to anticipate.

A man climbed in the front seat. He had slicked down black hair, a wide jaw and dark, frowning eyes. "I'm Detective Brookings. What's your name, son?"

"Reginald Poppel."

"You knew this Lance Henry Cummins?"

I nodded. He had used the past tense. "So he's—?"

"Yes, son. He passed away before we arrived. Did you know he was going to do this?"

"Yeah." I started sweating more, but I was freezing and shivering. I pulled the blanket tighter around me and hugged it over my mouth. I couldn't stop shaking and I was soaked through.

"How'd you know?"

I couldn't tell this detective I lived through it once before. "He said something about it yesterday."

"What did he say?"

"He said he was making a hit list. Then he said he was joking."

"You believed it was a joke?"

"At first I did. But then I didn't."

"Did you handle any of the weapons?"

"No."

"We'll be dusting for prints."

I pictured that gun lying next to my leg. "Wait. I did. When I found it in the Media Room."

"You found a weapon in the Media Room?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Right before Lance got there."

"You didn't put it there for him to find?"

"Put it there? No. I thought he might hide something there so I looked and found it." I knew this was sounding fishy, but it was the truth, sort of.

"Then what?"

"I moved it, hoping he wouldn't be able to find it and I could stop him. He was waiting when I came out. But he already had a gun."

"The handgun?"

"Yeah. He went to look for the other one. I yelled for kids to run. They didn't listen. He shot a couple of kids—and the janitor. And he was about to shoot me. That's when Officer Santana got there."

The detective shot me a look when I said the name. "You knew Officer Santana?"

"Yeah." There's the past tense again. "How—is he?"

"He's dead, son."

That's when I lost it. I gagged and puked all over the blanket.

He waited until my body calmed. Then he got out of the car.

"I need you to step out, son."

But I couldn't move. He pulled my hand away from my face. He took the blanket and pulled me a little to get me started. Once I was moving I just unfolded out of the car, balanced somehow.

He led me to the trunk. "Spread your feet. Lean over the car, hands wide above your head."

Another officer patted me down.

"We'll be taking you down to the station to ask you some more questions. You're under arrest for suspicion of conspiracy to commit murder at school. You have the right to remain silent."

It had always been my curse to remain silent.

"Anything you say may be used against you," and so on.

"How can I reach your parents?"

"My father works downtown at Charade Advertising."

"What about your mother?"

"She's out of town."

"Okay empty your pockets onto the trunk."

From my right pocket I pulled out a couple of dollars and my key. I reached into my left pocket and felt a wrinkled card. I dropped it on the trunk and the gold embossed police shield gleamed. I'd forgotten I had it. Officer Santana had given it to me at my house today, the first time. It had gone through the wormhole in my pocket. Now it lay crumpled on the trunk, like Santana in the hall.

The detective came up with handcuffs. "Put your hands behind you. We're going to put these on for your own safety. Okay?"

My own safety? From what?

He clapped them on my wrists, then turned away. "Medic!"

I was quivering when he put his hand on my head to make sure it cleared the roof as I got back in the car.

A stocky woman with dark hair and leathery skin came over from one of the ambulances.

The detective faced her. "This boy's got the cold sweats. He's soaking wet and shivering. He just barfed. Can you do something for him?"

"Was he at ground zero?"

"Yeah."

Then she noticed the cuffs and looked back at the detective.

He nodded slightly.

"I can't give him anything without parental consent. Maybe something hot to drink."

"Whatever you can do. Thanks."

She bent to put her hand on my forehead. "Tell me how you feel."

"Cold and sweaty and shaky." And I wished it had been me instead of Officer Santana.

She brought a fresh blanket, draped it around my knees and tucked it in around my neck and shoulders. She smiled a little, I think. "Would you like something warm to drink?"

I shrugged. I didn't care.

"I'll get you something and you can try it."

She came back with two Styrofoam cups. "This is water. Rinse, then lean over here and spit." She held the cup to my mouth. I swished and spit. The acid taste diluted.

"Good. Again. Okay, now try this. It's tea. And it's not very hot." She held the other cup up to my lips.

I tried it, but I almost choked. Nothing worked right.

It seemed like a long time. Everything was clear without words, without thought, floating there so true that words would be excess. I had finally done something and had failed. Now Officer Santana was gone. And it was my fault. I had been vain enough, stupid enough, to think I could actually do something. Worse even, that I could win. Not be the willing loser. Camilla walked away into the distance, never turning back, until she was gone from my mind's eye.

By the time they got me into the station, I was a zombie. I didn't care what happened to me. It didn't matter. I deserved the worst there was.

And that's how I got to be sitting here in this cell. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help me, please.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Let's go, son. Time to talk to the detective."

"I'm not supposed to talk to anyone."

"Don't worry, your public defender will be there. Just do what he says."

Still remembering what's good for me, I keep my mouth shut as I head down the hallway.

The radio is on. "The police apparently have a suspect in custody. His identity is being withheld. We have callers lined up waiting to opine on the issue of whether the youthful perpetrator should be tried as an adult. Our first caller is Phillip."

Tried as an adult? At that moment it sinks in that I will be on trial. Maybe for my life.

The officer leads me to the Conference Room. It's not the soft room. He opens the door. Gurton is already in there, sitting at the table.

"Hi, Reggie. You feelin' okay?"

"Yeah, great. When's my trial?"

"Maybe we can short circuit this whole misunderstanding and get you out of here with no trial. Right now we're going to speak with the detective. See what they've got. Also, I filed a request for a medical exam. The judge hasn't ruled on it yet. Do you have any questions?"

I shake my head. I've got a million questions. I just can't think of any. I glance at the mirror. Is the detective waiting behind it, watching me?

"Sit down. I want to go over what's going to happen and what you should do, okay?"

I shrug. I sit.

"Okay. When he asks you a question, you answer it unless I interrupt and tell you not to. Got that?"

I nod.

"And let him finish his question before you answer. That way, we'll know exactly what he's asking. And only answer what he asks."

"What?"

"Don't volunteer anything. Listen carefully to the question and answer only that question. I'll ask you a follow up if I think it's appropriate."

"Okay."

"One more thing, we want to make sure that I have a chance to interrupt if it's a question I don't want you to answer. So don't answer real fast, okay?"

"I guess so." All these rules. What's the damn point?

"If you're ready, I'll tell him to come in and we can get started."

I shrug.

Gurton knocks on the metal door.

The detective from before comes in. "Hi, Reggie."

"Hi."

"You remember me? We talked at Everett."

I nod. Of course I haven't forgotten the guy who arrested me. And watched me puke. And probably just left the other side of the mirror.

"I know things were confusing there and really intense. Now that things are calmer, I've got to ask you about some things."

"Okay."

"You knew Lance was going to do this?"

"Yeah."

"He told you about it?"

"Uh huh."

"When did he first say anything about it?"

"A long time ago, he said he was making a list and asked if I wanted to help. I asked him what kind of a list. He said it was a hit list."

"What'd you say?"

"I told him to shut up about that. Then he said it was just a joke. I told him it wasn't funny."

"How long ago?"

"I don't know. In the spring."

"Who was supposed to be on the list?"

"Jocks. Cheerleaders. Anybody he thought disrespected him."

"Did you do anything about it? Tell anyone?"

"No. I thought he was just talking."

"When did he talk about it next?"

"Sunday."

"Yesterday?"

"Yeah. He said the same kind of thing—about making a list. Then he said it was just a joke again. I guess it was stupid, but I thought he was just running his mouth."

"You're saying that yesterday you didn't believe him?"

"Right."

"But by this morning, you knew he was serious?"

"Yeah."

"Reggie. I think you'd better cut the crap."

Gurton puts his hand out over the table in front of me. "Just a minute now, Detective. I don't want you badgering my client. Remember, he's a kid and he's been through a lot."

"Yeah, Counsel, Lance Cummins was just a kid, too. And this kid here", he gestures toward me with his chin, "has his fingerprints on one of the weapons." He looks back at me. "Why don't you tell me how that happened."

"I figured out the Media Room was his hiding place. I got there first and found that big gun on a rack in the back. I moved it to a different rack and piled stuff on it so he wouldn't be able to find it. Then I went out to wait for him. I thought I could stop him. I didn't know he would already have another gun."

"When did you figure out his hiding place?"

"Earlier this morning."

"I asked you when. I need a time."

"I don't know. I was still home. Maybe 6:15."

"You expect me to believe that you sat through first and second periods knowing Lance was planning to shoot up the school?"

"Yeah. I thought I could stop him."

"Maybe you could have if you did something at 6:15."

"I thought I could be a hero."

"Well, Reggie, I think you were in on it."

"No, I wasn't."

"I don't believe that bull about you thought you could stop him."

"I'm sure you'll tell us why," Gurton says.

"It's like this. If you thought you would stop him, then nobody would get killed, right?"

"Yeah," I say.

"And if nobody got killed, everything would remain the same, right?"

"What?" Gurton says.

"But if people got killed, then things would never be the same, right?"

"You're making no sense," says Gurton. "And you're asking compound questions."

"Is that an objection, counsel? 'Cause this ain't court."

The detective pulls a piece of paper out of his briefcase and lets it float to the table.

Gurton picks it up and holds it so we both can look, but I already know what it is.

Gurton recites. "Never be the same, ever see the blame, whenever see the name, Lance."

"This, Mr. Gurton, is a little poem that your client wrote in second period, only minutes before the killings, at a time when he claims he expected to prevent it. Now the way I see it, he writes 'never be the same' and about 'blame' only if he expects there to be killings. This doesn't seem like a poem he would write if he really expected to stop it. Not exactly a heroic epic, is it?"

Gurton's hand goes up again. "That's not for you to answer, Reggie. Let's wait for the detective to ask a proper question."

"Okay, try this one. If you thought you'd stop him, why would there have been blame?"

Here goes. "I wrote that because I was thinking about the first time Lance did it. He killed even more people."

The detective's eyes dart to Gurton. Gurton nods slightly, his eyebrows flex.

"What do you mean 'the first time'?"

I tell him all about the first time, the killings, and Paulette and all. And how Officer Santana came to my house.

"And that's how come you already knew Officer Santana?"

I nod. I tell him how Lance got away and showed up in my room. And about the e-mail, and the wormhole and everything.

He looks back and forth from me to Gurton while I talk. He shakes his head every once in a while.

"So 'never be the same' referred to what happened the first time you lived through today. And the second time, you expected to stop it. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

I slump on the table, my hands over my face. It sounds so ridiculous. I'm not even sure I believe it.

"I've filed a request for a psych consult," Gurton says. "It's pending, but I expect it'll be granted, especially if there's no objection from the D.A. or the Department."

"There'll be no objection from my office," the detective says. "Will you consent to a search of his house?"

"No. You'll have to file a request for a warrant. I want to see what you've got," Gurton says.

I can't get any air. I'm trying to breathe but when I try to inhale, my chest spasms. Gurton is standing. I don't hear

anything. It's like I'm looking through a dark, patchy screen door. The black patches get bigger, growing together. Everything is spinning.

I open my eyes. I'm in some kind of hospital room. I want to rub my eyes, but my hands are stuck at my sides.

A nurse comes over to me. He checks my wrists. "Feeling a little better?"

"I guess." I'm disappointed the whole thing wasn't a bad dream. "Where is this?"

"The infirmary. You had an anxiety attack and passed out."

Disjointed pieces of one day twice flash in my mind. Parts of it might be a dream. But I'm not sure which parts. Who's dead? Is it Paulette and all those others? Or Santana and Lance? I look over at the nurse. "Who—died?"

He examines my face. "You think you're ready to start all this again?"

I nod. "I need to know."

"Okay. I'll tell the officer." He opens the infirmary door and murmurs to an officer standing in the hallway.

"I can't leave my watch," the policeman says.

The nurse mumbles something, then heads down the hall.

The door hisses closed, slowed by one of those pump hinges. In a minute the door swings wide as the nurse enters. "The detective says he'll be in as soon as Mr. Gurton gets back."

"Can't you tell me who died?"

"No, I can't talk about that with you. Strict instructions. I work for the police department, you know."

He comes to my side, lifts the edge of the blanket to reach my restrained wrist, and takes my pulse. "Mm Hmm." He takes my temperature in my ear. "Try to rest. They'll be a while." He walks behind a glass partition and sits to pound on his keyboard.

I try to piece things together. I remember they want a search warrant and a pysch consult to decide whether I should stand trial as an adult. Trial for murder. Me. Maybe I was right, the wormhole did lead to a prison, or worse. Conspiracy to commit murder. I'm guilty of things, but not that. Not murder.

I've got to do something. I can almost hear Lance saying it, "Rego, do anything, but do something." Now I have to, but I'm shackled to this bed.

My feet are free. My wrists aren't. I can't see them because they're under the blanket, but they feel as though they have straps around them, padded with fleece or something fuzzy, and holding them at my sides.

I test the restraints, pulling and wriggling against the straps with the base of my hands. I can't move. It's so damn frustrating. Clenching, blinding, tantrum-tension builds until I kick my feet in utter helplessness like a little kid. I want to scream.

The nurse looks up from his computer and heads over.

I'm quiet so he won't think I'm out of control. I need him to free my hands.

"Is everything all right over here?"

"Yeah, but can you free my hands? It's getting uncomfortable."

"No can do." He shakes his head and purses his lips. "Sorry." He checks the straps, then, apparently satisfied with them, heads back to his station.

What would I do if I got loose? Escape? Run to the streets like Lance had planned? It's like I'm becoming Lance—taking his place in something I tried to stop. But I didn't stop him, so now I would become him.

But I'm not Lance. I did try to stop him. How could I prove it? Paulette. I screwed up big time, but I had saved Paulette. Maybe now she could save me. Had Lance said something in front of Paulette?

I can't think. What had he said? If I relax a minute, maybe I'll remember. I close my eyes and force myself back there. I came out of the Media Room. Lance was there. *Impressive. You found my stash.* But Paulette wasn't there yet. *Risky business.* Still not there. Lance pulled out the handgun. The bell rang. Lance ducked into the Media Room. *Run. He's got a gun!* Then Paulette was there. *Choose, her or you. No slack.* He had both guns. Paulette could testify that Lance had both guns. I didn't have either. *Too slow, Rego, I'll take both of you.* She can say he was going to shoot me, too. Wouldn't that prove I wasn't in on it? But was she too scared to remember? Had she misunderstood? Did she think I was in on it? What if she thought Lance and I planned it together and he got tired of cutting me slack? So he turned on me.

I've got to talk to her and make her understand before the police get to her and confuse her. Before she hears about me on TV.

I fight the tension building inside me. I've got to calm down. I take a deep breath. And another, and with each breath I strain against the straps with all my strength until my arms go weak. Keeping my face calm, I strain again. My fingers throb.

Sweat beads on my forehead and rolls down my cheek. It collects and rolls down my brow and stings my eyes. I blink through it, staring at the back of the officer through the small window in the infirmary door.

"Excuse me." I try to sound calm.

The nurse looks over, raising his eyebrows and cocking his chin.

"I think my straps are too tight. They're really hurting."

"I'll check 'em for you."

He pulls back the blanket on my left and checks my wrist. Same on my right. "Your wrists are rather angry. Have you been struggling against the restraints?"

"No. Not since before. I've been trying to relax, but it hurts and my hands feel cold."

"Well, maybe they are a bit tight. I'll ratchet them back a little." He loosens my right. "How's that?"

"I still can't feel my hand."

"Okay, just a little more. Your hands'll feel better in a few minutes." Then he loosens my left.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Can I make a phone call?"

He shakes his head. "Sorry. I'm not authorized. The detective will have to handle that for you."

Before he's back at his station, I'm working my hands, not struggling against the restraints, but scrunching my hands trying to slip out of them. My right seems promising so I focus on it. By pulling and turning, I think I'm making progress. I can't tell. All the pressure hurts my thumb knuckle. I rest for a second with my hand wedged in.

The nurse looks up from his keyboard. I close my eyes. My thumb feels like it's being pressed out of its socket, dislocated. I don't care; my whole life has already been

dislocated. What does my thumb matter? I pull and twist, twist and pull. I think I'm making progress, but all I can really feel is a weird numb pain.

I peek. The nurse is concentrating on his monitor.

I can't twist any more, my hand is stuck. All I can do is to shimmy and rock it. I'm sweating again. My whole hand is numb. More rocking, then pulling, and my knuckle clears the restraint. My hand is free, but I keep it at my side, under the covers.

I really hadn't thought I could do it. Now what? The nurse still sits. The police officer's back still shows at the door's window. And I've got one hand free.

"Excuse me," I call.

The nurse looks over, raising his brow and lifting his chin in a blend of exasperation and concern.

"I'm getting kind of hungry. Is there anything to eat?"

"Not really." He glances at his watch. "Not for a while yet. There are a couple of vending machines by the locker room. You want something?"

"Yeah, anything would be great."

"Okay, I'll be right back."

"Thanks."

"No problem." He pushes through the door and stops to say something to the guard who glances back at me and nods to the nurse.

I've got to get to a phone. With my free hand I ratchet open the other strap.

The guard still has his back to me.

I'm up, standing on the floor in my socks. I'm desperate. The nurse will be back any second. I grab the handset from the phone at the nurse's station. There's a blue vinyl wheelchair in the corner. I roll it right next to the door and squat behind it.

The guard will turn and, glancing through the window, he'll see the empty bed. In the moment it takes him to open the door, he'll consider whether I've fallen. After all, that's why I'm in the infirmary in the first place—fainting. He'll wonder how I got loose? He'll look behind the door before he goes in. I'm not there. And he'll have to check behind the bed in case I passed out. That's where the crashing sound will come from.

Okay, here goes. I throw the handset across the room against the wall by my bed.

The door opens. I hear the guard coming in. He hesitates. I hold my breath.

As soon as he heads for the bed, I make my break out the door. I slip on the slick, polished floor in the hall and almost go down. I see an exit at the end of the hall to my right. I'm running.

"Hey!" It's the nurse behind me.

I blast through the double glass doors. I'm out, running down the walkway, across the wet lawn, and to the street.

Across the street are an old church and a few businesses. I head for the café and duck inside to the counter.

"Excuse me, but could I use your phone. It's kind of life and death."

The guy behind the counter looks middle aged, paunchy, balding, eyes without luster. He starts to say no, but stops as he looks at me a little too long. Maybe he senses the urgency.

"Okay, son. It's in the back, in my office. Come on."

I follow him to the back. He opens a door to a small, dark office. A desk nearly fills the space.

"There you go." He gestures toward the desk phone. "Either line, just press the button. Okay?"

"Yeah, thanks."

As he closes the door, I dial information. Please have a listed number.

"Directory assistance. What city please?"

"Everett."

"Listing?"

"Gidot. I don't know the first names. Maybe Paulette."

"How are you spelling that?"

"G-i-d-o-t, I think."

This is taking forever.

"There's a listing for Gidot with the initial 'P'."

I dial the number.

One ring, two, three, four.

"Hello."

"Paulette?"

"No, this is her mother. Who's this?"

"Rego, ah, Reginald Poppel. Is she there?"

I hear the TV on in the background.

"Reginald Poppel?"

"Yes. Please, may I speak to her?"

"No. Haven't you caused enough pain? Where are you calling from?"

"Please, Mrs. Gidot. I didn't do anything wrong. I really need to speak to Paulette."

"Listen to me young man, leave Paulette alone."

She hangs up on me.

What do I do now? Paulette probably thinks I was in on it. My last hope is gone. Hit the road? Or give myself up?

The door swings open. Two police officers, guns aimed, stand in the doorway.

"Put your hands on your head!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

"That soda is for you, if you want it." The detective sits next to me in the soft room. Having him this close is even more intimidating.

I shrug.

"Who did you call?"

"A girl from school. She knows I didn't do it, that I tried to stop Lance."

"I know that now, too."

"What? Where's Mr. Gurton? I don't think I'm supposed to talk to you without him."

"He'll be here in a little while. But you don't need him anymore. We're releasing you. I know now that you tried to stop it. And you probably saved a lot of lives by moving that gun."

I saved a lot of lives? What a joke. I cost at least three.

The door opens a little and Gurton's bald, shiny head peeks in. "Can I come in?"

"Come in," the detective says. "I was telling Rego, you go by 'Rego', right?"

I nod.

"I was telling Rego here that he's free to go as soon as his parents arrive."

"What happened?" Gurton comes to the table.

"I finally had a chance to check my e-mail. There was a message from last night I hadn't seen. A voice from the grave, so to speak. It was a message from Officer Santana, before any of this happened, reporting that he suspected Lance might be at risk for violent behavior. The point of his email was to notify me that Rego was working with him to try and prevent anything."

I have no idea what he is talking about, but something tells me to keep my mouth shut and not blink an eye.

"Then one of my officers called my attention to the clincher. Santana's card was in Rego's pocket when we arrested him. On the back of the card, Santana had written that Rego could call him 24/7 about Lance. That's good enough for me. So, we're releasing you, Rego."

"That's great," Gurton says.

"Just one thing, Rego. Why didn't you mention you were working with Officer Santana when I was questioning you?"

"Would you have believed him?" Gurton asks.

"No, definitely not. Too self-serving, what with Santana gone."

"Besides," Gurton smiles, "you didn't ask him the specific question."

"Right." The detective stretches the word and smirks. "I guess you out-lawyered me, Gurton." He turns to me. "Rego, grief counselors are working with the school.

Maybe you should avail yourself. Help you get beyond all this."

I nod.

"Your mother will be here soon and you can get out of here. Take it easy. And thanks for working with Officer Santana. I'm going to look into having the Department issue you a citizen's service award for bravery." He holds out his hand.

I shake it. I feel dirty, like I haggled a fraud over Santana's dead body.

Gurton watches the detective leave. As the door is closing, he says, "Reggie, what's this about you helping Santana? You never mentioned that."

"Would you have believed me?"

"I don't know. But that never stopped you from telling me about time travel."

"That was the truth. And the truth about Officer Santana is—is this still privileged?"

"Oh, yes."

"The truth is that I don't know what that detective is talking about. I never even talked to Santana about him suspecting Lance and I never worked with him on anything."

"Okay, Reggie, whatever you say."

"You think this is some kind of trap?"

"No, I don't. And he's right, you should get counseling. I'll have to withdraw the request for a psychiatric exam now that there will be no charges."

"You don't believe me. You'd believe a lie like I worked with Santana, but you won't believe the truth."

"It's not a matter of disbelieving you, Reggie."

"It's a matter of you thinking I'm nuts. Well, maybe sometimes a lie fits better, but that doesn't make it true."

"Reggie, it's not a matter of lies and truth. I believe that you believe you time traveled and that you never worked with Officer Santana. I think the whole thing has been traumatic and confusing. Understandably so. That's why I think you should see a counselor. And I'm going to strongly recommend that to your parents."

"Whatever."

"Reggie, I'm glad this has worked out. If you need anything, call me." Gurton extends his hand, this time like he means it.

I take it, but the congratulations seem wrong. "One thing, Mr. Gurton."

"What is it, Reggie?"

"I don't want any citation. Don't let him do that. I couldn't stand it."

"Okay, Reggie. I'll talk to him."

"Thanks. For everything."

Gurton looks down.

"You did a good job. You helped me. You really did."

"Well thanks, Reggie. That means a lot to me." He reaches over to pat my shoulder and bumps the soda can. It tips over and a wave of soda spreads across the table.

"Mr. Gurton told me he thinks you should see a counselor."

"Yeah. He thinks I'm confused." No one will ever believe I lived this day twice. As long as I say it, they'll think I'm crazy. I stare out the car window. Maybe I should stop saying it.

"It couldn't hurt, honey. You've been through so much. The anxiety attack and—everything."

And everything. She never says the words. Uttering the names of things like murder, death, blood, fear, hate and stupidity doesn't make them any more powerful. And naming them doesn't make them any closer. They're already right on top of me. In my face.

"Mr. Gurton told me about what that officer said in his e-mail."

"That's all wrong, Mom. I never did anything like that."

"But why would he say such a thing, Reggie?"

"I don't know."

I shrink until half of me is wedged between the seat and the door.

"Mr. Gurton told me about the citation for bravery, too."

"I couldn't stand that."

"I know, he told me that, too. You don't have to think about it now. Maybe later."

"Never, Mom. All I did was screw it up. I don't want a citation for that." I picture myself on stage receiving an award. Everyone's face is twisted. Everything's warped. Things that should be tall are short. Things are too far away. I'm small and shrinking. Do they all know the whole story? They turn their faces away from me in disgust. So would I. But I can't, I'm stuck in here with myself. I press my face against the window. It's cool.

My mother picks up the phone and tones a call.

"Hi. It's me." She turns to me. "Your father's home early.

"Yes, dear. He's right here." She looks at me like she's going to pass the phone.

I shake my head.

"He's had a rough day, dear.

"No, he's all right. Just a little confused and upset.

"Yes, that's what they said. A hero."

I wince. I fight a gag.

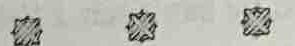
"Okay, we'll be home soon.

"Yes, that's really something. See you in a few minutes."

She hangs up. "He's very proud of you."

"What for?"

"You know, the citation."



My father has the news on when we walk in.

Rex spins in excitement, then leaps straight up.

"Hi, bud," I say.

Rex runs to find a ball.

My father turns from the TV. "Hey, hey, all hail the hero."

"You've got to stop saying that. I'm no hero."

"Everybody at the office is talking about it. First was all the shock about the shootings, then all about how Reggie kept it from getting out of hand."

I think my head might explode. "Three people are dead—so far. That's pretty out of hand, wouldn't you say? And it was all my damn fault."

"Then my biggest client called to say, you know, congratulations, and all, and how he'd like to meet you. You know, have lunch. Might be a summer job in it for you, Reggie."

Can't he hear me? "Stop it, please. I can't take it."

"Reggie, dear, it's not your fault you couldn't save everyone," my mother says.

What's the use? "Please, stop," I whisper.

"Sit down, listen to this," my father says.

I stand there.

"Joining us now from our New York studio is civil liberties attorney, Andrew Glover." The screen splits. "Welcome, Andrew."

"Thanks, Charles."

"Andrew, what do you make of this latest incident of school shooting?"

"Well, Charles, let me say first that this highlights the need to severely restrict guns in our society. Without guns, this wouldn't have happened."

"What do you say to the people who claim they have a Second Amendment right to be free of restrictions?"

"The Second Amendment says that the right to bear firearms should be 'well regulated'. I believe that the safety of our children demands such regulation."

"What about all the violent media. You know the statistics about how many killings a child sees each day on TV, movies and video games?"

"Well, Charles, there's no evidence that media violence by itself causes violent behavior."

"Well, maybe no evidence proves it's the sole cause, but how can you seriously dispute that it contributes? Just like guns contribute."

"When we talk about media, we have to be careful about the First Amendment. Any regulation of speech is a step onto the slippery slope. Once we start restricting it, we won't necessarily be able to stop."

"But the media giants are selling violence. To make money. Can't that be regulated?"

"Yes, commercial speech can be regulated. But who's to say what's art and what's purely commercial?"

"You don't think that we can make judgments about what has artistic content and what is commercial exploitation?"

"That sounds like censorship to me."

"So you would do nothing, just throw your hands up and allow anything to be sold—no matter the effect?"

"It's that slippery slope, Charles. We've got to protect our constitutional rights."

"But Andrew, don't you worry about that slippery slope when regulating Second Amendment rights? That once we start regulating, we'll end up banning all guns?"

"No, Charles. The Second Amendment itself contemplates regulation."

"So that gives you comfort that our lawmakers will know where to stop when it comes to guns? Even though you doubt it when it comes to free speech."

"Certainly. And the Second Amendment is not as, you know, important as the First."

"Where does it say that?"

"Nowhere, but isn't it self-evident?"

"Let's get down to brass tacks, Andrew. Deep down, you wouldn't mind if all guns were banned, would you?"

"Well, Charles, most other civilized countries live just fine without any gun ownership."

"Yes, and without a Bill of Rights, too. Okay Andrew, what's your read on the police actions in Everett High School?"

"It appears to me, Charles, that the lone policeman who was in the school acted recklessly. We can't have some renegade cop going off on his own using his gun as the solution to all problems. The police should have moved much more cautiously. Maybe the whole episode could have been talked out. Negotiation, not violence. Instead, their cowboy mentality results in perhaps unnecessary deaths."

"Thanks for coming on, Andrew."

"That sucks! That's so wrong."

"Calm down, Reggie," my father says.

"But that fool doesn't know what the hell he's talking about."

"Reggie, your language," Mom says.

"Now to our reporter in the field, Venus Flaumgarten."

The screen shows the reporter standing in front of a house. "Our sources indicate that the police have detained a possible second shooter in the Everett High killings. He's been identified as Reginald Poppel, an Everett High junior. Ironically, he lives only a short walk from one of his victims, Officer Santana."

One of my victims? My last year's school picture appears on the screen.

My father's jaw drops. "What? Reggie?"

"Credible sources have told us, on the condition of anonymity, that a second weapon has been recovered at the scene. That weapon is a semi-automatic firearm. On it are the fingerprints of another student, Reginald Poppel. We are told that he was arrested on the scene and that he has been taken down to the police station for questioning."

My picture disappears and the reporter fills the screen.

"I'm here outside the home of slain Police Officer Joe Santana. A few minutes ago, I was able to get his widow's reaction."

The screen switches to a tape of the reporter at the front door. A young woman holding a baby on her hip stands in the doorway. Her eyes are puffy. She wipes one of her cheeks. The other is just as wet.

"Mrs. Santana, I'm with Channel Ten News. How are you feeling after hearing that you lost your husband in a shootout?"

The young woman seems lost. She takes a step back. She shakes her head.

The camera takes a step forward.

"Are you aware that one of the suspects, Reginald Poppel, lives just around the corner from here?"

This hits me like an electric shock.

Tears flow down his wife's face. She sobs. The baby starts to cry. She stumbles back to the wall behind her.

I feel like puking all over again.

An older woman comes to the door. She puts one hand under the younger woman's arm to prop her up. With the other she gives a backhanded wave as if to shoo them away. "Leave her alone! What's wrong with you people?" She slams the door.

The reporter is back on screen, live.

"That's all we have right now. We'll keep you updated. I'm Venus Flaumgarten for Channel Ten News."

My father stomps around in front of the TV. "I thought they couldn't identify a kid by name. This is unbelievable." He fumes and paces and then clicks off the TV. "They can't drag our name through the mud. I'll sue."

I walk toward my room.

The doorbell rings.

Rex barks and charges the door.

"Reggie, get the dog." My father stomps to the door and opens it.

"Mr. Poppel, I'm with Channel Ten News. We'd like to get your reaction to your son's arrest."

I peek out from my room.

My father steps outside, leaving the door wide open. The microphone is in his face, the camera rolls.

"Why don't you people get your facts right?"

"That's why we're here, Mr. Poppel."

"You go to that poor woman's house and tell her the killer lives around the corner. What's wrong with you?"

"We just want to get the whole story, Mr. Poppel."

"Well get this straight. My son is not under arrest. He's not in custody. He's not even a suspect. He's home, in his room, trying to get some rest. Your anonymous sources forgot to tell you that."

"He's here right now?"

"Yes."

"May we speak to him?"

"No! He's been through a lot. And it doesn't help to have your station claiming that he was involved in this horrible thing. It doesn't help my business, either."

"We certainly want to correct the record, Mr. Poppel. He was in custody, wasn't he?"

"They just wanted to ask him a few questions."

"Then he was a suspect for a while?"

"Only because the brass down there didn't know he was working with the police. When they found that out they let him go quick."

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"Then he was a suspect for a while?"

"Only because the brass down there didn't know he was working with the police. When they found that out they let him go quick."

"He was working with the police?"

"Yes, sort of undercover. When they finally figured it all out they said he would get a citation for bravery. He saved lives. Why don't you put that on the air?"

"How did he come to be working for the police?"

"I don't know. I didn't even know he was doing it. That Officer Santana apparently suspected Lance and enlisted Reggie's help."

"Help doing what?"

"I'm not sure. Trying to stop this Lance Cummins character, I guess."

I'm deep sick. I close my door, slump onto my bed, and curl up.

Rex whines and leans his head on the bed.

So I saved lives. How many? Not enough. Not Officer Santana. Not the custodian. Maybe not the others in critical condition. And Lance. What about Lance? He wanted to have the greatest contest of all times. To him, I probably won. I thought I had won until I saw he had that gun from his locker. He thought he was so smart. Until he couldn't find the gun in the Media Room. He was right about one thing. I am a loser. I expect to lose and I do. This one time I fooled myself into believing I could win. At least Paulette's okay. She won't haunt me, except her stricken look. And Mrs. Santana's face will never leave me, the grief, the confusion, the disbelief. The injustice.

This citation thing can't go on. Would they have some kind of ceremony? Would she come? I couldn't stand that. I wrap the pillow around my head, like I might keep it from exploding. I'm rocking. Oh momma. I can't escape.

The phone rings. Again. Again. I can't.

"Hey, Reggie. It's for you. Mr. Gurton," my father yells.

I open my door. My father's still on the phone.

"Yeah, except the TV people, until I set them straight, were still saying he's a suspect. That's probably going to kill me at the office." My father paces. "Yeah, yeah, I know. We'll get Reggie to see one of them tomorrow. Okay, thanks. Here's Reggie." My father hands me the phone.

"Hello."

"Hi, Reggie. You okay?"

"No. Not really. You've got to make them stop that citation thing."

"Don't tell him that," my father says. "Why would you tell him that?"

"Why, Reggie?" Gurton asks.

"I don't deserve it and I couldn't stand it."

"You do deserve it and you'll get it." My father takes the phone. "Listen, Gurton, he does deserve it. Don't listen to him. He's just upset now. Don't stop anything 'til he's had a chance to calm down. Yeah." He hands the phone back to me. He mouths something I don't understand.

"Reggie, don't worry about the citation thing. It'll be however you want. I'll call you tomorrow to check in. If you need anything, call me. Okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks. Goodbye."

I hang up. I breathe.

"Why would you tell him that, Reggie?"

"Because I don't want any kind of award for screwing up."

"What are you talking about?"

"I had a chance to stop it. And I didn't because I was dreaming about being a hero. Now that I screwed it up, I don't want any hero thing."

"You're talking nonsense, Reggie. We need that citation."

"No!" I run to my room. *We* need that citation? I slam the door. Pacing in a circle, I find no relief. I punch the wall. It hurts but it's like it's somebody else's hand.

Rex whines at the door.

I open it and he comes in, wagging his tail and grinning. He has a ball sticking out the side of his mouth. He kind of flips it up to me.

"Not now, boy."

He turns two circles and plops to the ground with a moan.

I slump to the bed silently.

There's a knock at my door. "Reggie?" My mother opens the door a crack, then sticks her head in. "Come quick, your father is on the TV."

I drag myself into the living room and stand behind the couch. There he is on the TV, with a mike in front of him and our front door open behind him.

"Mr. Poppel, can you update us on your son's status?"

"My son is not under arrest. He's not in custody. He's not even a suspect. He's home, in his room, trying to get some rest."

"He's here right now?"

"Yes."

"May we speak to him?"

"No! He's been through a lot."

"We certainly want to correct the record, Mr. Poppel. He was in custody, wasn't he?"

"They just wanted to ask him a few questions."

"Then he was a suspect for a while?"

"Only because the brass down there didn't know he was working with the police. When they found that out they let him go quick."

"He was working with the police?"

"Yes, sort of undercover. . ."

Knowing he's about to brag about bravery brings waves of nausea as bad as when I heard it live. I cover my ears with my hands and watch my father on the screen, muted, until they cut to that Charles guy with the craggy face and prissy glasses.

"That report was filed by our on-the-scene reporter Venus Flaumgarten. She's been doing a remarkable job. And I think she may have uncovered a scandal. I've never been around dead animals, but I think I smell a skunk."

This guy probably smells himself. The hack.

"This young man, Reggie Poppel, was working with the cops to try and prevent the very event that transpired today. I should correct that. He wasn't working with the cops, he was working with one cop. The brass didn't even know about it. In fact, his parents didn't know about it. And that one cop is the same officer who just happened to be in the school building on this fateful morning. Coincidence? Not likely.

"What's more, young Reggie Poppel's fingerprints were all over the gun.

"My instincts tell me this is something we've seen too many times before. Law and order gone bad, culminating in a botched entrapment. Overzealous, renegade cops cloaked with the authority of the State, taking admittedly troubled kids, impressionable and on the verge of going astray, then providing the means to carry out some horrific crime in order to catch him in the act. An ill-advised counterintelligence plan played out against children by ill equipped, cowboy cops. Where was the brass in all this? Where was the supervision?

"Obviously, when one plays with fire, sometimes things get out of control. Unwanted but not unpredictable consequences result. In this case, the policeman died, the young man gone astray died, a heroic staff member died, and two children are in critical condition. A bitter harvest of activist policing.

"Now stay tuned for some messages from our sponsors."

"That was fantastic," my father strides around the room.

"How?" my mother asks.

"This is perfect. Reggie is a hero, even though the cop was taking advantage of him, and even though we didn't know about it. This really smoothes things over."

My mother smiles at me and nods. "See, honey, things always work out for the best."

"Great," I say.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." But I'm not.

"Do you want something before dinner? Maybe some toast, or cookies?"

I shake my head.

"A glass of milk? Or maybe a soda?"

"Sure, a soda." I don't really want it, but if it'll get her off my back.

I escape to my bed.

She brings in the soda and puts it on my desk.

"Here it is, honey."

"Thanks, Mom."

"You're very welcome. Do you want me to leave your door open?"

"Closed, please."

"Okay, honey." She closes the door on her way out.

Rex has fallen asleep. I watch his restful breathing. Every once in a while, his foot moves. He groans and woofs quietly, distantly, probably dreaming of the chase. But is he hunter or prey?

Nothing else moves in my room, except the bubbles rising in the glass through the brown soda and disappearing.

The last time I was at Lance's house, we were in the family room playing video games. Actually, he was playing, I was watching.

His mother had always been perfect. Perfectly poised, perfectly polite. The opposite of Lance. I guess she forgot I was there.

"Lance, get down here this instant!" she screeched.

I'd never heard anything like that from her before.

"What, Ma?"

"How long do you expect to keep your brain plugged into that garbage?"

She pummeled. I blanched. He ignored.

"If you don't buckle down you'll never get into a decent college. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah."

"Don't 'yeah' me, young man. All the girls at the club yap about their brilliant children going to this college or that. I'm not going to have you while away your chances playing a game for idiots."

Lance looked like he didn't even hear her, except his jaw was clenching.

"If I have to come up there—" She stomped up the stairs.

That's when I wished I could disappear. I had an impulse to jump behind the couch. I had visions of climbing out the window. But there was no escape.

"I will not be embarrassed—" She turned through the doorway and saw me sitting there.

I felt as though I had been caught peeping at someone taking a dump. I wanted to disappear like a bubble she wouldn't be sure she'd actually seen.

She recovered instantly and smiled at me, except the creases that pinched above the bridge of her nose lingered. It made her smile look bitter.

"Hi, Reggie." The sweet tone of her voice was incongruous with her sneer.

I wanted to look away, but I didn't. Her tennis whites were bright. Her gold bracelet twinkled.

"Hi," was all I could utter.

"Lance, honey, do you have homework?"

"Not much." He stared at the screen, his jaw working.

"That's good. I'm heading to the club for a tennis date. Don't play too much longer, okay dear? It's really not good for you." She looked back at me.

"Yeah," Lance grumbled.

"See you later, honey. Goodbye, Reggie."

"Goodbye."

After she left, Lance didn't talk. I got out of there.

Rex's dream chase gets more intense. Lying on his side, his legs actually feign running. Is it a nightmare or a glory? A loser or a hero?

The phone rings. Rex is up.

"Hello," my mother answers. "Oh yes, I heard. I'm so sorry.—Yes, he's here, but he's pretty upset—No, of course not. I'll see. Just a minute."

My door opens. "Reggie. Lance's mother is on the phone. She'd like to speak to you, but she says if you don't

feel up to it, she understands. Would you? I think it would make her feel better."

It won't do much for me. "Okay, Mom." I follow her into the living room. There the phone sits. I pick it up from the table. "Hello."

"Hi, Reggie. This is Mrs. Cummins."

"Hi." Is she wearing tennis whites?

"Reggie, you've heard what they're saying about Lance?"

"Yeah."

"That he—killed people."

She waits.

What can I say? "Yeah."

"I can't believe them, Reggie. But they say you were there. Is it true, Reggie? I need to know."

I'm sinking. "Yeah."

"You saw him—with a gun?" She starts to cry. "Reggie, you saw?"

"Yes, Mrs. Cummins. I saw it all. He did—"

Through the sobs, "Oh, no," and then, click.

"I tried to stop him." But she's already gone.

I did try to stop him, at the brink. Damn me for wanting to beat him. And damn me for losing. Just like he said. He was right about me. Was he wrong about himself?

What will Mrs. Cummins do now? Will the *girls* at the club avoid mentioning children in front of her? Will they avoid her altogether? Will the *perfect* be gone from her life? I picture her tennis bracelet, a golden heap, abandoned in a back corner of some drawer. Never be the same. Never say the name.

The phone makes some clicking noises and the dial tone

sounds. I hang up. It rings again before I've taken my hand off of it. I jump.

It rings again. It seems haunted.

"Reggie?" My mother calls from the kitchen.

"I've got it, Mom." I lift the handset. "Hello?"

"Rego."

"Hey, Matt."

"I saw your father on TV, man. Unbelievable. He was like a wild man."

"Yeah."

"And all the suspect stuff they've been saying about you—I told my mom that was all bull."

"She believed it?"

"She said she didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to think, either, when I heard all that about Lance. But I set her straight about you. Then your old man was on. Wild."

"Tell me about it."

"You saw some stuff, huh?"

"Yeah. I was right there."

"I know, the hero and all."

"That's bull, Matt."

"The news said you saved lives."

"Yeah, but first they said I was a killer. The hero thing isn't any truer. Here's what's true. I could've taken Lance out. I didn't want to die. That doesn't make me a hero."

"Hey, Rego, you did what you could."

"I know what went on in my head, Matt, and I was no hero. I just should have told somebody."

"Told them what?"

"What he told me Sunday, yesterday. That he had a hit list."

"So why didn't you?"

"I thought they wouldn't believe. And I wanted to stop him myself. I wanted to beat him."

"Yeah," he mused.

"You sound like you can relate."

"Definitely. Lance always acted so superior."

"Yeah, and I wanted to beat him bad. Big mistake. I should have told someone. Made them believe me. At least I should have," my throat catches, "tried."

"You all right?"

"I don't know. I feel sick. Guilty. But it's weird 'cause I also feel like I'm finally seeing things."

"You hallucinating?"

"No." I actually laugh a little. "Everything in my life always seemed indecipherable, like I needed a translator. But now things seem clearer, you know?"

"Sort of. I'm not sure."

"It's like my whole life has been in hieroglyphics. I could see the characters, but I could never make any sense out of any of it. All of a sudden, I can understand."

"Hieroglyphics?"

"No, man, never mind. Things in my life seem clearer, that's all. You were in Music, right?"

"Yeah. As soon as the stuff started coming down, Mr. Kranick locked the doors and nothing happened 'til the police took us out. What was up with Lance, anyway?"

"I don't know. It's unreal."

"Did you see him. . .? You know."

"Yeah. I was right there when he went down. You wouldn't believe all the blood and stuff." My head starts pounding.

"I've never seen anybody—dead."

"Hey, Matt, I've got to go. I don't feel like talking."

"Okay. Listen, maybe I'll catch you later."

"Hey, Matt, thanks for calling."

"No prob. Adios."

I wander back to my room and sit on the floor against my bed. Rex comes over and plops down next to me. His ears are so soft.

Like I told Matt, things that used to seem beyond my comprehension seem somehow clearer, especially the social stuff. Guys and all the rules about what stuff means, what you say and don't say. What you can say to girls and what you can't say. What they expect. What they think.

What would people do if they really knew me? The thing is, as it is, they think they know me. And it isn't so good. Maybe it would be better if I let them really know me. What would be the worst thing that could happen? They might think I was boring. They already think that. They might think I'm a fool. The clarity begins to warp, skewing, it begins to cloud. I have no way of holding onto it. In a moment, it's lost. I'm as confused as ever. Hieroglyphics again. What if they think I'm a fool?

I feel that stuck feeling in the back of my throat and a twinge in my eyes. I blink, but they moisten and pool. My lower lip begins to twitch. I swallow, rub my eyes and squeeze my lips. I blink hard. It stops.

Rex stands. He puts his paw on my leg and licks my ear.

A tear escapes, rolls down my cheek and drops onto my hand. Rex licks me again. I exhale and the tears run unbound.

CHAPTER NINE

The door opens without a knock. My father pokes his head in.

I wipe my face and turn away.

"Time for dinner." He walks in.

I clear my throat.

"Hey, Reggie, you should have seen it. I really set those news hounds straight. Put them right in their place. That's my job, to protect the family name. Maybe it'll be on again later and you can see it. It was great. Come on, we'll watch during dinner."

He leaves before I can tell him I already saw his performance.

I get up to close the door. Rex is at my feet. His brow is creased. He looks at me expectantly, trying to figure out what I intend to do.

"You wanna eat, boy?"

He hops, twirls once and waits at the door.

"Okay, let's go."

Rex bounds through the house toward his bowl.

I guess I'm too slow, because by the time I'm halfway there, he has doubled back to make sure I'm still coming.

The TV plays a commercial. I try to block it out.

My mother is setting the table.

Rex waits while I fill his bowl. He always takes a few tentative bites before digging in. He does it this time, too.

I head back to my room.

"Dinner, Reggie."

"I can't eat, Mom."

"Maybe it would make you feel a little better."

"I can't eat."

"Well, maybe later."

I close my bedroom door and sit at my desk facing the computer. I feel almost as though it holds the answer. And I've got questions. Like, who sent that e-mail to the detective? It was designed to get me out of trouble. So who could the sender have been?

There is no way Santana could have sent that e-mail. We've never even met, except when he came to the door. And that was today, the first time. It hasn't even happened yet. Now it won't. He would have had no reason to say I was working with him, anyway. How would he even know I exist? He can't have sent it. Somebody else must have.

But who? Anybody who saw the news would know I was in custody. And would know that Officer Santana died in the school. So, who would do it? Lance? Last night or early this morning, in some perverse twist, had Lance found the detective's e-mail address and sent a message in Santana's name? Why would he take the time to do that? What would he gain by making sure people knew I wasn't

in on it? Credit? Like he didn't want to share his accomplishments? Or maybe he did it to protect me in case he lost the competition. To save me? I don't think so. No way. That's just not like Lance. He was ready to put one right through my face.

No way would he have spent the time to send that message. And there's no way he would have had time. He hadn't even left my house until after six this morning. He'd have to have gone home and hacked around to find out where to send it. And could he have made it look like it was from last night? With his plan ready to unfold, he'd never have had the patience to sit at his computer fussing with that. No time, no patience, no gain, wrong attitude. Definitely not Lance. Not Santana. Who else?

"Reggie?" My mother calls.

I don't feel like dealing with her.

She knocks. "Reggie?"

"Yeah?"

She opens the door. Rex trots in, wagging his tail slightly, and plops down by my bed.

"Reggie, how are you feeling?"

"Fine." I turn my face back to the computer.

"If you want to talk, I'm here."

"Okay."

"What honey? I couldn't hear you."

"O—kay, Mom, I get it," I say too loud with an edge in my voice.

"Let me get you some dinner. You should eat something to keep up your strength."

"No, Mom. I can't eat."

"Maybe later?"

"I'll get something if I get hungry."

"Well, don't go for the ice cream or cookies."

"Why not?" I'm beginning to boil.

"Get something nutritious first."

"Okay, okay." I stand and pace over to my music collection, pretending I'm looking for something. If I had somewhere to go, or some way to get there, I'd go. But I don't. "Okay, Mom. I got it."

She gets the message and closes the door on her way out.

I know I shouldn't act that way. She means well, but sometimes I can't deal with it when she tells me stuff I obviously know or can handle myself. Sometimes it makes me mad.

I turn on my computer. While I wait for it to power up, there's a knock at the door. Oh God, not again.

"Reggie?" My mother opens it. "I made a tray for you in case you got hungry."

"No thanks, Mom."

"Well, I'll just leave it here in case you want to nosh a little." She puts it on the bed.

Rex rises with interest.

"No, no, Rexie, that's not for you." She pushes it back a little farther.

Rex sits, ever hopeful.

"Hey, Mom, do you remember the old farmer who was here before our house?"

"Not really, Reggie, but I remember one time we came to see our new plot and there was a farmer here."

"Wasn't this his farm?"

"I suppose so. I don't really know. I'm surprised you remember him."

"Did I talk to him or anything?"

"I don't think so. You were little. I do remember you getting excited about his tractor."

"He had a tractor—I kind of remember, I guess."

"The back tires were so much taller than you."

It's vague, a dream had long ago. But I can still feel his sadness at being displaced from where he fit. "Was he sad, Mom?"

"I have no idea, honey. What makes you ask that?"

"Nothing."

"Something made you ask. Come on, I'm interested."

"I don't know. It's nothing."

"Come on, Reggie, let me in."

"There's nothing, Mom, really." I turn back to the monitor.

"Okay. Don't forget to eat." She leaves.

I look over to the tray. About as appetizing as kibble. Rex apparently has a different view, but he finally gives up and settles back down on the carpet.

I turn back to the screen and feel a rush as I notice the "new e-mail message" icon. I retrieve it.

To: Reginald Poppel

From: Maverick

Subject: Monday Redux

I know you suffer. Things don't often turn out exactly as one wishes. If you can tell yourself you did your best, rest easy, for one can only do one's best. When one does less than one's best, there is the recipe for regret. I hope your pain is not regret, for that pain festers.

I thought you might want to know, I sent the e-mail to the detective. I was sorry to use poor Officer Santana's name, but

it was a fraud in service of innocence and necessary to your release. And it was necessary for me, so I may avoid regret. After all, I tempted you into this hopeless endeavor and provided you the means. My part remains unfinished. For me to do my best, your release was necessary. Necessary also for you, perhaps, in case you yet have unfinished tasks of your own.

Have you unfinished tasks, Rego?

I read it over twice, trying to make sense of it. He knows I suffer. He knows it's from regret, that I didn't do my best, but he doesn't want to accuse me. He sent the e-mail to the detective so I would be released. So he wouldn't feel guilty? So he could do his best? For tasks unfinished. What else can he do? All he has done so far is send e-mails. And open the wormhole. If I could, I would do it again. I'd do it right this time. Am I really capable of doing it right? I don't know, I screwed up so bad. But at least I proved myself capable of trying. Weak as it had been, sad as it had turned out, I had tried.

I hit the reply button.

To: Maverick

From: Rego

Subject: Tasks Unfinished

You're right, I suffer regret. I didn't do my best. You already know that. But how? Who are you? You think I still have tasks to do, but I don't know what they are. There's nothing more I can do. Unless I can redo. I'm ready. But I can't redo without you.

Is your unfinished task to re-open the wormhole?

I send it. Does he really know me or is he guessing? Is he somehow watching me?

After a few interminable minutes during which I check the e-mail every ten seconds or so, the message signal finally appears.

To: Rego
From: Maverick
Subject: Redux redo

Who I am is difficult to answer, since part of it I can't reveal. I am a historian from the future. I am part of an organization of scientists and others who use time travel to study the past. Our charter commits each of us to learn from the past without changing it. I happen to be studying your time, on location, so to speak, and using a false identity. Since the rules of the CyberTimeSurfing Institute forbid changing the past, as soon as they find out what I've done, they will expel me from the program and recall me from my on-location assignment. An expulsion would be career threatening, but I couldn't let things stand. And I still can't.

You ask what tasks I have unfinished. Since you are willing to rego, I will open the wormhole, one last time. It'll take you again to Monday morning at six. In thirty minutes, the blue light in your hall will give you one last chance. Make of it what you will. Do your best. And good luck.

Maverick

CHAPTER TEN

Just like before, the blue light will wipe everything clean. I can crumple up the page of today, fling it away, and start on a brand new, fresh page. I feel the thrill of a new start, but the emotions of the past weigh on me. I can't shake the guilt of those deaths. I traded lives for a chance to be a hero. Stupid. Risky. Selfish. And it didn't work. I don't feel like a hero, no matter what they say. I know what went on in my head, and I was no hero.

I feel the clarity returning. What's right and what's important isn't really all that complicated. You can't place importance on whether people see you as a fool. Foolishness is not importance. And what's important is never foolish. I can see it among today's jumbled camouflage of images. I can hear it within the racket of broadcasts, pointless words, and wandering thoughts. It's there. I will not be distracted. It doesn't matter whether I play the fool or the hero, as long as I play it right.

To: Maverick

From: Rego

Subject: Thanks

You have an awesome power, being able to change the past. I guess your Institute will say you abused it. I just want to say thanks for the chance.

I hit "send" and wait for a response.

If I'm lucky enough to have the wormhole appear again, I'll be ready. I've got to stop Lance all the way this time. But which Lance will it be? Will it be the Lance of the first time, who had to go out to his car, or will it be the Lance that knows his lockermate is going to be absent. I carry the knowledge of the other times. Will Lance? I mean he died this time. This is too much for me to figure out. Whichever Lance it is, I've got to get a jump on him, make a preemptive strike.

As I open my bedroom door. I see blue, flickering light in the hall, but there's no wormhole. My parents left their door open and their TV is on. I tiptoe out of my room.

"Reggie, is that you?"

I swear you can't make a move. "Yeah, Mom, just me."

The blue, glowing oval appears at the far end of the hall. This time it is the wormhole.

"Are you okay, honey?"

"Yeah, Mom. I'm fine."

The neon blue brightens, intensifying. There's a faint odor of mint in the air.

"Do you need anything? I'll get up."

"No, Mom, don't get up. I'm fine."

The oval shimmers, then stretches toward me as the tunnel lengthens. The hallway is cast in blue phosphorescence.

"I'll get you something to eat. You must be hungry."

"No, Mom. Don't."

She appears in her doorway at the far end of the hall. "What in heaven's name? Reggie?"

I step into the wormhole and through the blue tunnel. I'm out the other side. My mother is not there. It's morning, Monday morning yet again. I've had enough practice to be good at Monday mornings, whether they're redux or brand new.

The blue tunnel contracts back to an oval, flickers and then disappears.

My father staggers out of their bedroom, rubbing his eyes. "What's all the commotion out here?"

"Nothing, Dad."

"What's that smell?"

"I don't smell anything."

"What time is it?"

"A little after six."

"Why are you up and dressed at this hour?"

"I've got to go to school early today."

"The school's open now?"

"It will be by the time I get there."

"You've got to have something to eat. Remember, you can't do your best without a good morning meal."

"Yeah, I've heard that somewhere before. Tell Mom I'll catch something at school. I promise."

"Your mother's not here, Reggie. She's at Grandma's. You forgot?"

"Oh, yeah. Listen, I've got to go. I'll see you later."

I pat Rex and head out the door.

Officer Santana said I could come over anytime. Of course, he said that on the first time I lived this Monday.

This is the third time. Am I nuts? I'm running down the street at six a.m. to a call on a cop I met only in a kind of prior life.

I can't run the whole way, so I slow to a fast walk. It's pretty light now and there's starting to be a little morning activity. A lady with robe held snug at her throat and fluffy slippers comes out on her porch to get her paper. Another lady walks a tiny dog with a bushy tail. Its feet are hardly bigger than a squirrel's. A couple of cars head out for early work.

Only a couple of blocks left to Haverford. If I get Officer Santana to believe me, I'm home free. If he doesn't believe me, I'm screwed. It'd be tough to convince some other cop after Santana blew me off. I wouldn't even know how to reach the principal until school started. Maybe Mr. Fields. I remember tossing the slip of paper with his number on the table. I wouldn't know how to reach him, either. If Santana doesn't believe me, I'll have to get to Lance myself.

I break into a run. Here's Haverford, but which way? I run to the right. The first house is 1130. The next house should be 1134. It's not. It's 1126. I've turned the wrong way. I run back passed 1130, crossing the street, and passing 1134. Haverford curves slightly so I don't have a good view of 1142 until I'm almost next door, at 1138. Officer Santana's house is white with blue shutters. A white car is parked in the driveway. I run up the walkway and bound up the front steps.

I'm huffing and puffing as I press the doorbell. It makes a buzzing kind of ring until I let go. I press again. The newspaper sits on the stoop.

Then it grips me. What if this new redux is just a dream? What if nothing's changed and Santana is still

dead? And his wife answers the door thinking I caused it? I have the impulse to run, but it's too late.

"Who is it?" a woman's voice asks.

Well, here we go. "My name is Rego. I live around the corner. I need to speak to Officer Santana. It's an emergency."

"Just a minute, I'll get him."

I exhale my relief so deeply I almost fall. But, an eternity goes by. I pace, resisting the urge to press the bell again.

The door opens a crack. "What is it, bud?" It's Officer Santana.

"There's going to be a shooting at school. You've got to stop it."

The door opens all the way. Officer Santana steps out. His uniform is pressed and snug across his chest. His arms are thick.

"Slow down a little. What's your name?"

"Reginald Poppel, Rego. I live here in the neighborhood."

"Yeah, I've noticed you around. What's up?"

"I know this guy, Lance. Last night he said he had a hit list and he was going to get justice today."

"And you believe him?"

"I didn't at first, but something about it bothered me. The more I thought about it, the surer I got that he's really going to do it."

"All right, come in for a minute." He steps inside and holds the door.

I follow.

"This is my wife, Ellie and our baby girl, Chloe. Honey, this is Rego. He tells me there may be some trouble at school. Rego, have a seat. I'll be back in a minute." He walks down the hall.

Ellie has long dark hair brushed straight back. It's wet, like she just got out of the shower. She's wearing a fluffy white robe and has her arm around little Chloe, who straddles her left hip. Chloe holds a plastic baby cup. They both have big, dark eyes. They're beautiful.

"Come and sit down for a minute, Rego." She smiles.

I sit on the edge of the couch, leaning forward.

"I guess you probably don't drink coffee. Would you like some juice?"

"Juz," Chloe says and holds up her cup.

"That's right, sweetie." Ellie beams. "That's Chloe's juice. Maybe Rego would like some."

Chloe holds out the cup to me.

"No, thank you. I'm okay."

"You can have your own glass. You don't have to share." Ellie laughs.

Chloe, watching her mommy, giggles. She pulls her cup back and puts the little spout in her mouth. She makes sucking sounds.

"Rego's an interesting name. Is it a nickname?"

"Yes, for Reginald."

"What kind of trouble at school, Rego?" she asks.

Officer Santana strides down the hall. His footfall is heavy.

"Maybe shooting," I tell Ellie.

"Okay, let's go." Santana kisses Chloe on her chubby cheek and caresses the heel of one little foot. "Bye-bye Daddy's big girl." He kisses Ellie on the mouth. "See ya later, babe."

"I hope everything works out. It was nice to meet you, Rego." She extends her hand.

I take it, feeling like I should kiss it or something. I don't. "Thanks, Mrs. Santana."

"Please be careful. Both of you."

I follow Officer Santana out the door.

Ellie stops at the doorway. "Say bye-bye to Daddy and Rego, Chloe."

They both wave, one with pudgy little fingers, the other with slender grace.

We get in his car. He starts the engine.

"They're nice," I say.

"Yeah. My girls are great. I'm a lucky man. Truly blessed. Now, tell me about this. What's the kid's name?"

"Lance Henry Cummins." It slips out. I guess I've heard it in threes too many times lately.

"He lives around here?"

"Yeah. Over on Conlin Road."

"What exactly did he tell you?"

"He said he was going to get some final justice at school today. He said he was going to take out the jocks and preps and snobs that are always disrespecting him."

"What else?"

"He didn't really say anything else. I said to stop talking stupid and then he pretended it had been a joke so I let it go. But I've been thinking about it ever since and there was something about the way he said it and the look in his eye that really scares me. I believe it this time."

"What do you mean, this time?"

"He said something like that once before, a few months ago, about making a list and getting even with everybody."

"Does this Lance guy have any weapons?"

"I've seen him with a handgun. But never at school or anything."

"His own?"

"I don't know."

"I've got to call this in. Sit tight."

He presses the phone keypad and holds it to his ear. "This is Santana. I need the watch commander." He taps his finger on the phone as he waits. "Yes, Sergeant. It's Santana. I've got a high school student with me, lives in my neighborhood. He's telling me he knows a guy who's been talking about a hit list and getting justice at school today. Apparently he has access to a handgun, at least.

"Yeah, it's Lance Henry Cummins. Right." He turns to me. "Where does he live?"

"On Conlin. I think it's 2442 Conlin."

"Conlin, Sarge. Probably 2442.—Yeah, he's sitting right here in the car with me. —Reginald Poppel, goes by Rego—Yeah, Everett High." Santana looks at me, raising his eyebrows.

I nod.

"Yes, sir, I got it." Santana hangs up. "Okay, Rego, we're heading to Lance's house."

Santana backs out of the driveway and drives away from his house.

"What about school?"

"The watch commander will call together the emergency response team, that's the administration and the public works department, and they'll assess the threat and decide what's necessary. Maybe set up road checks, search the buildings. Find Lance, that's the main thing. They're sending a couple of squad cars to meet us at his house."

Just before Conlin he says, "Which way?"

"Right. It's just up here a little."

He makes the turn.

"There, the brown one on the left."

He pulls into the circular driveway and stops in front of the house. "Wait here." He gets out and walks to the front door.

I get out and lean against the car.

He rings the bell.

Lance's mother answers. "Yes, Officer, what is it?" Then she sees me. "Reggie? Is there a problem, Officer?"

"Just routine, ma'am. Is Lance at home?"

"No. He's gone already. He had some things to take care of early at school."

"Did he say what?"

"No. Just one minute." She turns from the door. "Henry, the police are here."

"How did he get to school, ma'am?"

"He drives."

Lance's father comes to the door. "What's the problem?"

"Nothing to be alarmed about. It's just a precautionary inquiry. May I have a look in Lance's room?"

"You may not," Mr. Cummins says. "Drop the double-talk. What's going on?"

"Do you keep a handgun in the house, Mr. Cummins?"

"Yes. And it's properly registered. Everything's legal."

"Would you do me a favor and check on it while I wait."

"What for? What is this?"

"Maybe nothing. Please check your weapon."

"All right, but then I want some answers." He leaves.

"Pardon me if I do not invite you in," Mrs. Cummins says. She looks over to me, cold.

"No problem, ma'am."

Mr. Cummins reappears at the front door. His face is drooping. "It's gone. The case is empty. What's this all about?"

"Your son said some things about getting even with some kids at school. I'm trying to make sure it was nothing. May I see his room?"

"Okay, this way." Mr. Cummins leads Officer Santana into the house. Mrs. Cummins follows.

I get back in the car and slump so I can lean my head on the seatback. Ellie and Chloe looked so different when I saw them on TV. Puffy eyes instead of wide and clear. Wet cheeks instead of wet hair. Shattered instead of glowing. Wilting, not blooming. Could Lance's heart be cold even to all that warmth? He knows not what he does. I do.

Officer Santana comes out the front door, jogs to the car and climbs in.

He gets on his phone again. "This is Santana. I need Sergeant Mays." He nods at me, like it's okay. "Break in on the meeting. I'm on the team and I've got an emergency. Okay."

"Did you find anything in his room?" I ask while he's on hold.

"Not sure. There's a—. Sarge, I'm out front of the Cummins home. The father's handgun is missing. I checked out the kid's bedroom. There's some kind of a hand drawn map. Nothing else stands out.

"Yeah, I already told them to stay out of his room. They're pretty freaked out. Okay, got it." He hangs up. "We'll stay here until another unit arrives, then you can show me around. Don't worry, everything's under control."

"What's the map thing you found?"

"It's like a floor plan, maybe of the school. It's got some arrows on it and some writing. I didn't take time to figure it out. I just wanted to see if there was any indication of bomb making, or other weapons. I didn't see anything.

"You did the right thing coming to me, Rego. Maybe nothing will come of this, but you wouldn't be able to live with yourself if innocent people got hurt. Or worse."

"Tell me about it." I picture Officer Santana lying in the hallway in pooling blood. Ellie and Chloe crying. Paulette's lip trembling, her mother collapsing in the Adams schoolyard. The custodian leaping to save Paulette. The absurdity of calling me a hero. I shudder to be rid of all of it, like I can shake it off.

"You okay? You look a little green around the gills, as they say."

"I'm fine."

"You think you'll get a hard time at school for telling me about this?"

"You mean for being a snitch, or maybe a rat."

"Yeah, I guess. Whatever you would call it."

"Not really. Maybe before. But since all this stuff has happened around the country, I don't think so. People know it's serious."

"That's good. 'Cause it's hard enough to stand up."

"I really had no choice this time, even though it's hard for me to stand up. And even if kids did tag me, so what. You do what you have to do."

"You make it sound simple, Rego. You've got a mature approach. Most people don't see things so clearly."

"I never did either, but I guess I'm getting better with practice. A lot of repetition."

A police car pulls up to the curb.

"Okay. Sit tight, Rego. I'll be right back." Santana goes to the other car.

Another police car turns the corner and parks across the street. An officer hops out and jogs, hand on holster, to where Santana is talking with the first officer.

Santana comes back to his car and gets in.

"Hey, Rego, Lance drives to school, right?"

"Yeah, every day since he got his license."

"You'd recognize his car?"

"Definitely."

He starts the engine.

"Describe it."

"It's a black Honda. It's got a roof rack and he's probably got his bike on it."

"Okay. Good."

Santana pulls away from the curb.

"Did he walk to school before he could drive?"

"Before the car, yeah."

"You ever walk with him? Do you know the routes he'd take?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Good. We're going to cruise. They haven't located his car yet. And since this is an unmarked, we won't be too obvious."

"Will they cancel school today?"

"Good chance. The radio'll announce it, but a lot of students and staff come in early. They don't want kids wandering around with no safe place to go. They're setting up a perimeter around the school grounds. They'll be searching the buildings to make sure he's not already there. And they'll be cruising the approaches. Did Lance say anything about his plan?"

"He said different things. First he said he would leave the guns in his car until third period. But he also said he would hide them in the school so he wouldn't have to go out to his car."

"Did he say where he would park?"

"No."

"Or where in the school he would hide guns?"

"He didn't say, but I'd guess his locker or the Media Room."

"Why the Media Room?"

"He's in there a lot. It stays unlocked. There's lots of junk in there where you could hide stuff."

"Where is it?"

"Main floor. Near the main stairs."

Santana uses his cell phone to report about the Media Room.

"They'll check the Media Room. They've already been through his locker. Nothing."

"If his locker is empty, the Media Room probably will be, too."

"How do you know that?" Suspicion is in Santana's tone.

I search for something I can say. "I don't know. It just seems like the guns will still be in his car." Brilliant.

We cruise the front of the school. There are police cars everywhere. They are stopping cars trying to get in the parking lot.

"Okay, Rego, let's check out some of Lance's old walking routes. Which way?"

"Turn around and head up Waverly to Glenn, and then to Conlin."

That route turns up nothing.

"Any others?"

"Make a left on Council, it's that little sort of alley, then cut through the parking lot, cross Glenn, then into the Library lot."

When we pull into the Library lot, I see Lance's car. Police cars surround it.

"They've got him," Santana says.

Lance leans against one of the police cars, with his hands behind him. An officer stands in front of him. The others are looking through his car and trunk.

We stop next to one of the police cars. Lance stares at me. He knows I turned him in. So what. Compared to the last time I saw him, it's good to see him standing and breathing. Even his glowering at me is a welcome sight. For a while, anyway, then I look away. He's probably thinking I'm a real loser. He thought that anyway, but now he's probably really pissed. So what. I look back to him. He's still leering at me. I shake my head. Why would his pitiful little injustices get so blown out of proportion? So many good people would have died. I watch Officer Santana talk with a fellow officer. I look back at Lance. Nobody should die because of his confusion, just because they've acted mean. Nobody's meaner than Lance, anyway.

Santana comes back. "They've been through the car. No guns."

"How about the trunk?"

"Clean. But we'll take it to the station and go through it a little better than we can out here."

"What about Lance?"

"We'll take him to the station. And you, too."

"What for?"

"Rego, you don't have any grudge thing going on with Lance, do you?"

"No. What do you mean?"

"No matter how this turns out, I mean whether or not he was going to do it today, you did the right thing coming to me. Okay?"

"Yeah."

"As long as you didn't like make it up in order to get Lance in trouble. Some kind of a vendetta?"

"No way."

"That's what he's saying."

"He's lying." Like always. It's Lance.

So here I sit, back in the interrogation room, waiting again for the detective to question me about a vendetta against Lance. What the hell happened? I know they won't find guns in the school. He hadn't even been there yet. What'd he do, change his mind on the third time?

I take a deep breath. I shouldn't feel angry, but I do. No matter what happens, at least Paulette, Officer Santana, the custodian and all the others, even Lance, won't die. Never be the same. My life is over either way. If people had died, I couldn't live with it. If Lance had no weapons, and I'm just a rat, my life at school will be even more screwed than before. So what. I had to do what I had to do and it was right. The rest doesn't matter.

The metal door groans open. The detective comes in followed by Officer Santana.

"I understand you go by Rego. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Rego, I'm Detective Brookings. I came to commend you for what you did today."

I look over at Santana. He's smiling. He nods.

"To come forward the way you did takes courage, a kind of a commitment to what's right. Believe me, I know. But it takes more than just courage and commitment. It takes insight. Insight into human nature and communication.

It isn't easy to decide if something is a joke in bad taste or a real threat. You obviously have a clarity of view and a grip on what's necessary. I'm proud to shake your hand."

He extends his hand. I stand and shake it.

"I don't know how the other students will react, but no matter, be secure in the fact that you did the right thing."

"Thanks."

"Officer Santana will take care of you from here." The detective leaves the room.

"What happened?"

"Well, Rego, they found nothing at school, and Lance was doing some fast talking, making up a pretty convincing story that you were the one planning the shooting and that you were trying to get even with him for not going along. He's good, I've got to admit. But I was holding out for you, because I could see when you came to my door this morning you were on the up and up. I could feel it."

"So tell me. What happened?"

"When the techs got the car in the shop, they pulled out the seats. Guess what they found under the back seat?"

"Guns?"

"Two, a handgun and a semi-automatic. And a bomb. I guess Lance was gambling that we wouldn't look there and we'd just hand his car back to him, fully loaded, so to speak. The funny thing is, the techs said the back seat bottom came out so easily, it almost popped out on its own. So Lance's story went up like a cloud of smoke. Except now he's claiming he wasn't planning anything. Just had the stuff in his car. He doesn't see how ridiculous that sounds."

"What will happen to him?"

"That'll be up to the DA and the court. But I'm guessing that he'll be put under some kind of custodial supervision program for a while."

"What's that mean?"

"He'll be in custody for some time, then he'll have something like probation. They'll probably require some psychiatric screening and counseling. You know, like anger management, or something."

"What about school?"

"You a little worried about seeing him around?"

"I guess. It would be weird."

"Don't worry about it, Rego, he'll probably be sent to a different school. I can't imagine they'd place him back in an environment with the associations that Everett has for him."

"I hope you're right."

"What is it, Rego?"

"I was thinking that unless his parents move or something, I'll have to deal with him sooner or later."

"You're right, but maybe he'll come to see that you helped him. Probably saved his life."

"You don't know Lance. It'll be I betrayed him. He'll find some way to get me back." I picture trusting Rex, wagging his tail, waiting intently for the ball to be thrown.

"Listen, Rego, don't think that you'll have to deal with it alone. No matter what, I'll be there."

"Thanks—"

"Call me Joe."

"Thanks, Joe." But it gives me no comfort as I picture Ellie pushing Chloe's stroller around the same neighborhood that Lance drives. But I could never voice that to Joe.

Wait, I'm not going to be like my mother, like things will go away if you don't say them. I'm saying this out loud.

"Won't you worry about Ellie and Chloe being in the neighborhood?"

"No. I don't see us as targets. Listen, Rego, school's gonna be closed. You want to go out for some breakfast? It's on me, neighbor."

"That'd be cool, Joe."

"What's your pleasure?"

"I don't care." Wait, no more of that. "How about that diner over on Douglas?"

"Sounds good."

Joe drops me off at my house after breakfast. Rex is waiting, as if he knew I was coming.

Breakfast was nice. Joe talked a lot about Ellie and Chloe. Like nonstop. He's funny. I got invited to Ellie's birthday party. It's kind of weird, but I think I'll go. Joe said I should bring a date. Yeah, right. Like maybe I could ask Camilla to go. I've barely ever talked to her. I wonder.

I call my dad's office and get his voice mail. "Hey, Dad, it's Rego. Just wanted to let you know that I'm okay and all and I'm at home. See you later."

I curl up on the couch and turn on cartoons. I don't know why, I'm not really watching them, kind of looking without seeing. But it feels right.

The phone rings.

"Hello."

"Reggie, it's Mom. I'm so glad you're all right. You are all right, right?"

"Yes, Mom."

"What happened, Reggie?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? The news up here said something about a student being arrested with guns and bombs. Grandma and I have been awfully worried. And you're home early. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes."

"Well, what happened, Reggie?"

"Lance told me yesterday that he was going to get some people at school."

"Oh my gosh."

"I didn't believe him at first, but by this morning I was worried, so I went to see our neighbor, who's a police officer."

"Which neighbor is that?"

"His name is Joe Santana. He and his wife, Ellie, and their little girl live over on Haverford. Anyway, he took over and they found Lance's car with guns and stuff under the seat."

"I'm proud of you, Reggie."

"Thanks, Mom."

"And you're okay?"

"I'm fine. They canceled school, so Joe brought me home. I left a message for Dad."

"You know I'm planning to stay with Grandma for another couple of days."

"Yeah, Mom."

"I can drive back right now if you need me. I could be there in a few hours."

"No, Mom. Everything's fine."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure. Stay and have fun with Grandma. Say hi for me."

"I will. And she sends her love. We both do. Goodbye, honey."

"Goodbye, Mom."

When I hang up, I feel something hit the back of my leg. I know exactly what it is. Whenever Rex senses a break in the action, he's ready to invite me to play a game of fetch. I turn and see the scruffy tennis ball at my feet. Rex stares at it, brow wrinkled, primed to pounce, as though he's calling my attention to the thing he sees as infinitely fascinating. He looks up at me, gauging whether I have noticed the dirty jewel. He looks back at the ball, directing me.

I can't help but smile. "So you want me to throw the ball." I emphasize the magic word.

He picks it up and kind of flips it so that it bounces off my leg again.

I pick it up. Rex is poised as though I hold a magic lantern. "Okay, let's go."

He bounds and twirls his way to the back door and waits.

When I open the back door, he charges to the far end of the yard and waits for my throw.

I throw it nearly straight up, as high as I can.

He follows it, positions himself, and when it bounces he leaps, he levitates, and snags it cleanly at the height of its flight and then charges back to flip it at my feet.

He can do this forever, but in ten minutes he'll be happily exhausted. With everything that's happened, it seems like a long time since he's had a good workout. But to him, it was probably just yesterday. In fact, it was just yesterday.

I throw it again. He loves it so much. At its height he leaps and lunges, but it bounces off his nose and flies into

the ivy. He pounces into the ivy and freezes, waiting for a telltale movement, as though it might take flight and escape. When it fails to move, he rustles in the thicket for his prey.

Rex has a simple life. He's found things that interest him and to those he is devoted. If there were no tennis balls, what would he do? Chase an old shoe or a stick. What if there were nothing to chase? Would he get neurotic and bark at shadows or chase his tail incessantly? Then he could go to the doggy psychiatrist and get tranquilizers. Or maybe he could be taught to watch TV, instead. He could recline against the couch and languish numbly between meals. But all he really needs is a ball.

Somehow the idea of TV is appealing.

"No more now, Rex."

He trots to the door with his trophy bulging from the side of his mouth.

"Drop it."

He obliges.

We go in. The TV still plays some space alien cartoon.

I pick up the phone and dial Matt.

After four rings, "Hello."

"Hey, Matt, what's up?"

"Hey, Rego. A surprise day off, it's the best."

"Yeah. What're you doin'?"

"I'm still in bed. Just listening to the radio, trying to hear what's going on between cuts. Some guy was going to shoot up the school. They haven't identified him."

"It was Lance, man."

"No kidding? How do you know?"

"He told me yesterday that he was gonna do it. I told the cops."

"You're kidding."

"No. I was there when they arrested him."

"No way."

"Yeah. They found his arsenal under his back seat."

"The guy was always weird. Do you think he would actually have gone through with it?"

"No question. That's why I had to tell. It was no joke."

"Definitely."

"Hey, Matt, you wanna play some one-on-one?"

"Can you stand the humiliation?"

"Bring it, if you got it."

"In an hour, man."

"Okay."

I curl up on the couch again. Muscle-monster and Barbie-built heroes are in mortal battle with insect-crab creatures. I close my eyes, Camilla smiles, and I'm asleep before the first commercial.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

You go around not appreciating the ordinary, dragged down by its routine. Then that thing happens that makes you never take "ordinary" for granted again. I hope I'll never take it for granted. Never let the routine of even good things drag on me, just because they're routine.

Today will be like that. I will appreciate the old "ordinary." I may even take one or two of its opportunities that'll make it fresh. A new "ordinary" created by me.

My clock radio screams. I blink a few times and roll out from my covers. My favorite morning DJ team is screeching about something. I pop the "off" button. Sorry, not today.

The hot water cures the morning chill, right down to my bones.

This morning I brush my hair straight back off my face. It looks all right.

I dress in the clothes that won't get me mocked. You know, next time I shop I'll probably pick the same stuff 'cause I like them.

"Good morning, Reggie."

"Mornin'."

"Can you get yourself some cereal or something? I've got to get to work."

"Yeah, Dad. No problem." He doesn't say anything about a balanced meal and doing my best. I guess he doesn't have to.

I grab a bowl and pour it full of flakes, then flood it with milk.

Before I leave, I scratch Rex's ear and pat his head. "See ya later, boy."

Ordinarily I walk to school. So that's what I did this ordinary Tuesday.

I figure that even if they let Lance come back to Everett, it won't be for a while. When he does, I'll deal with it, whatever happens. The bottom line is I had no choice. Well, I guess I had choices. I even tried a few different ones. But this one feels better by far.

I see some guys in the hall.

"Hey, Rego," one of them says.

"Hey."

Get to my locker. "Hi, Nick."

"Hey, how you doin' Rego?"

"Feelin' good, Nick."

He smiles. "Cool. Hey, nice do."

"What?"

"Your hair, man."

"Oh." For a second I want to pull it right back down.

"It looks cool that way."

"Thanks."

"What'd ya think of that thing yesterday?"

"Pretty insane. Makes the regular things look good."

He slams his locker. "Yeah. I know what you mean. See you later, man."

"Yeah."

Some gorilla walks by. He bumps into me. When I turn, he kind of nods. Not exactly a "sorry", but not exactly not a "sorry".

I nod back.

Ordinary day?

Sitting in first period, I can't take my eyes off Camilla's legs. Her tiny Band-aid thing is gone.

"Listen up, people," Mr. Baldacci says. "You all know why school was canceled, right?"

There's a lot of murmuring.

"They've asked all first period teachers to address the matter so we can clear the air. Our illustrious administration, ably aided by the local police, thwarted an apparent plot to shoot up these hallowed halls. The alleged plotter is one of our own students. The police have not released his name.

Whispers of "Lance" bounce around the room.

"Three major themes, here, people. First, apparently we can thank another of our students, as yet unnamed, for saving us. This student notified authorities about the plot. We are all in his or her debt."

It seems as though his gaze lingers on me. Does he know it was me?

"Second, if any of you feel uneasy about these events, counselors will be available during and after school hours for the rest of the week. Please do not hesitate to seek out

a counselor or any teacher, should you wish to talk about anything.

"Third, all such situations raise the issue of bullying. We do not know whether this plot was some twisted response to bullying, but whether or not it was so motivated, please monitor your behavior toward others and treat everyone with the respect with which you would like to be treated. We call this the Golden Rule. Ever hear of it? Take it to heart. Any comments?" Mr. Baldacci scans the room.

"Nothing? Then down to work." He passes out the outline he would have given out yesterday, except school was canceled. Everybody takes one and passes the rest back. We've been doing this for years. We're well trained.

I wonder if my name will get around. Probably will. I wonder how that'll be.

Camilla turns to pass back the papers. I try to catch her eye. She smiles. She has dimple kind of creases at the edges of her smile. She looks down at her paper, then glances up at me and flashes those dimples my way for a glorious instant before she turns forward.

"Now people, the outline you are receiving concerns the very foundation of our way of life. No, it is not tonight's TV listings. It is the first ten amendments to our Constitution, the Bill of Rights. Let me set the background for you. In 1787, delegates—"

As Mr. Baldacci drones, I float. Yesterday, the first time, I sat here oblivious to the tragedy about to explode. Yesterday, the second time, I sat here excited, deluding myself that I would save the day. Today I sit here in the glow of a dimpled smile. What's that saying? The third time's the charm.

"Well, Mr. Poppel?"

I jump.

The class laughs.

Mr. Baldacci looks at me. "Mr. Poppel, do you have any pearls of wisdom to throw before the class on that topic?"

Uh oh. "What?"

"Not what I would call a pearl. I suppose you neglected to listen. Still in the stupor of the unscheduled three day weekend?"

"Sorry."

"Quite. Anyone else?"

Off the hook, I float away again. Too distracted to track. Would she really go to Ellie's birthday party with me? It would be a weird thing, but better than the mall. Maybe Joe would drive me to pick her up.

"Listen up, people. I've saved some time today because I have an announcement. Today is my last day as your teacher."

A murmur rises from the class.

"I don't want to leave, but there are circumstances beyond my control."

"Did they fire you?" some guy in the back yells.

"No, no, nothing like that. But before any rumors start floating around, I wanted to tell you myself. I've got to go back home, to my people, so to speak. You might say I've been recalled."

"Like a defective tire?" The comment gets a few snickers.

"More like a prodigal son. I guess I've been a bit of a maverick, now I need to go back and pick up my responsibilities. Any questions?"

A few hands shoot up.

"Yes?" Mr. Baldacci points.

"Who will our new teacher be?"

"I don't know. This has all come up too fast. I understand they have an excellent sub to stand in until there's a permanent hire. Perhaps the sub will be hired. I don't know. Other questions?"

I guess my arm went up.

"Yes, Mr. Poppel?"

"You're Maverick?"

"You could call me a maverick, yes. I've been independent, setting my own rules to a degree."

"Like changing the past?"

He holds up his hand, like a crossing guard. "The journey, Mr. Poppel, is to the future. The past cannot become the journey. At best it provides some guidance. At worst, it provides pure confusion. That's why we study it, to sort the guidance from the confusion." He gestures to the whole class. "But for all of you, the future is both the process and the prize." He looks me right in the eyes. "Make of it what you will."

The class sits in silence.

"Okay, class dismissed."

A racket erupts of books slamming, backpacks sliding, kids shuffling and talking. Over the din, Mr. Baldacci says, "Good luck all, it's been fun."

Before I'm out of my seat, chattering students surround Mr. Baldacci, anxious to have their final audience with him.

❁ ❁ ❁

Lunch is after fifth period. I usually meet Matt. I'm hoping to see Camilla.

Paulette and her crew are circled by the door.

The custodian is picking up some paper that missed the garbage pail.

Paulette turns and tosses a plastic drink container toward the pail. It hits the rim, bounces high, then tumbles to the floor. She makes no move to retrieve it.

She smirks at me. "Well it's his job, that's what we pay his salary for." She turns back to her crew.

I move to pick up the container, but the custodian waves me off.

"It's all right, son. She's right, it is my job."

The latent hero fetches the brat's refuse. Unbelievable.

Camilla is standing by herself outside the cafeteria. I walk toward her. She sees me and smiles, her dimples an embrace. I'm almost there when her friend, Danielle, comes from the side and gets there first. They're talking. They both look my way. What do I say?

"Hi." Really smooth.

"Hi, Rego," Danielle says in a teasing singsong.

I'm blank and probably looking totally goofy.

"Did you get the history notes?" Camilla asks.

"Ah, not too well. I was a little tired this morning."

"Me, too, but I have them, if, ya know, you still want them, even though Mr. B is leaving."

"Yeah, that would be nice, thanks. Okay, then. See ya later." I turn and walk away.

They laugh.

Oh, geez. Thank goodness Matt is waiting so my escape is covered.

"What was that all about?" Matt asks.

"Nothing much, just making a fool of myself." But I feel good. Maybe she was saying I could phone her. The thought has me jumpy. I watch as the girls vanish in the crowd. I love history, especially the notes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I couldn't call her right when I got home. That would be too weird. So I've waited. And waited. It's a good thing, anyway, because I haven't come up with anything good to say. Like, "Hi, Camilla, this is Rego." She'll probably come back with, "Hi, Rego." Then what? Like maybe, "You know how you said I could borrow your notes?" She'll come back with, "Yes." I'll be stuck with, "Well, can I borrow them?" I can't do this. I've been over it a hundred times. I'd better forget it. She probably doesn't expect me to call, so if I don't, she won't think anything about it. So I'm going to forget it. It's better that way.

I turn on the TV.

She probably wouldn't remember anyway. It'd be like, "Hi, Camilla, it's Rego." She'd probably be like, "Who? Rego? Oh, Rego, right, from history. What do you want?" Then I'd be stuck with, "Ah, nothing, ah, just called to say

hi." It's better if I forget it. Then I won't have to call. I'll just forget all about it.

I plop onto the couch.

"Welcome to Right Angles. I'm your host, Deirdre Phelps. Tonight we'll be talking with civil liberties attorney, Andrew Glover. Stay with us, we'll be right back."

I get up and walk to my room. I pull the student directory from my bookshelf and flip to the "R's". Rathcoat, Camilla. There it is, seven magic numbers. Maybe it'll go great, like, "Oh, Rego, I'm so glad you called. I was thinking about history class and wondering if you really needed those notes." Then, "Yeah, Camilla, I do. Can I borrow them some time?" She'd come back with, "Oh, sure, why don't you walk me home from school tomorrow and I'll loan them to you." Wow. But then what would we talk about when I walk her home? I'd better forget it. I put the directory back on the shelf. That's what I'll do; I'll forget it. I take the directory down again and stick a piece of paper into the "R" page. It's better if I just forget it.

Back in the living room, Deirdre Phelps is holding court. "Andrew, you have a problem with the way the police preempted the planned assault on Everett High?"

"Yes, Deirdre, we do. Preliminarily, we have the problem that the police made the bald assumption that the young man in question was planning an assault. There is no evidence that he planned an assault."

"What about the weapons? And have you seen his website?"

"The website is irrelevant. Admittedly, it is full of hate speech, but hate speech alone cannot be criminalized without gutting the First Amendment. We may find it abhorrent, and believe me, I do, and we may find it evidence for

the fact that this young man needs diversity training and probably counseling, but it is no evidence that he planned a massacre."

"And the weapons found in his car?"

"We have several problems there. First, the police had insufficient cause to search his car at the scene when they detained him. All they had was the uncorroborated suspicion of another student. But they searched anyway. And what did they find at the scene? Nothing. Still, they arrested him and impounded his car. This, Deirdre, is tantamount to police state tactics."

"But they did find assault weapons and bombs. Shouldn't the police be applauded for stopping a catastrophe? Maybe saving many lives?"

"Deirdre, I can't applaud the trampling of the Constitution and neither should you. Once we step onto that slippery slope, we will slide to the complete erosion of our civil liberties."

"Andrew, I must say I'm baffled by your position. Would you have the police ignore this type of threat and wait until we have another Columbine?"

"No one wants another Columbine, Deirdre, least of all me. But I don't believe we can let the irrational fear of another Columbine cause us to condone Gestapo tactics."

I can't believe this guy. I wish I could tell him about the wormhole. I wish he could see the stilled bodies and the blood. I wish he could hear the moans and cries until the blasting alarm overwhelms all sound, except the popping of Lance's gun down the hall. He should take Mrs. Gidot's arm when she crumples under the weight of an unbearable loss. He should see Ellie's face swollen and wet from crying.

I change the channel and keep changing it until I find a station not playing a commercial. There's a rerun of Gilligan's Island. Gilligan's running around covered in giant feathers. Phony robot-like laughter is supposed to make us think it's funny.

I go into my room and check for e-mail. No messages. I open the last one from Maverick and re-read it. One last chance. Make of it what you will.

Mr. Baldacci all the time, all year long, was from the future. Teaching us while he studied us. I wonder what he could have learned from being at Everett. Of all the places he could be. And he's changed history. A historian who's changed history. Now his career is ruined. Did he have a real choice? They expected him to let things be, no matter what. But he's a maverick. Make of it what you will.

I pull the directory from the shelf and open it to the marked page. I dial the seven numbers.

Ring, ring, ring. I have the impulse to hang up. I resist it.

"Hello."

"Camilla?" My voice cracks.

"Yes."

"Hi, it's Rego."

"Oh, hi, Rego. I'm glad you called."

"Really?" Why did I have to say that?

She laughs. "Yes, really. Do you want to borrow my history notes, even though Mr. Baldacci's leaving?"

"Yes, definitely."

"Maybe we could meet at lunch tomorrow. I could give them to you then."

"Okay."

"And you could bring Matt. We could all have lunch together."

"That would be great. I wanted to ask you something else."

"What?"

"My friends Joe and Ellie, they're older, they're married and everything. Anyway, Ellie's having a birthday party on Saturday and they invited me. It's kinda weird, but, would you like to go?"

"That sounds like fun, sure."

"Joe's a police officer."

"Is he the one you went to? I mean, I heard you were the one who told the police about Lance."

"Yeah, he's the one." And I'm the one who told.

"Rego?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"It was nothing."

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

It's been six months since all of that happened. Camilla and I are close now. We're together almost all the time. We see Joe and Ellie sometimes. And just about every week Joe and I shoot hoops or play racquetball or something. It's good having older friends. Hangin' with Matt is good, too. And no Lance. That's really good.

Everything was great until two days ago. That's when Rex died.

Only two days ago. It seems like forever. They found him in the road. Hit by a car. Somehow he got out of the yard. I was at school. I didn't know anything about it as I drove home. Blissful ignorance. But as I rolled up, I saw a tarp spread out in front of our house, one of those old canvas things, stiff and brittle. It had something under it. I couldn't make sense of it, but I knew it was bad. As I got out of the car, I saw a little bit of his fur, his tail, sticking

out from the edge of the tarp. I went cold. It couldn't be real. Not final. Not this. I called him. He always comes when I call him. He didn't come. He didn't move. His tail didn't wag. It seemed unreal, but at the same time I knew it was over. I didn't know which way to turn. Everything, everywhere was empty.

I wish they hadn't covered him. He should have been out. I pulled the tarp back. He was still, like the deepest sleep, but no dreams. No chase. They found his ball next to him in the street. It lay there with him under the tarp. I picked it up. The jewel had dimmed.

At least he didn't suffer. That's what they said, anyway. I still can't even think about it. It's like he's still here. He's still supposed to be here. He's still in my head, hopping and twirling. Except that tarp is always in my dreams. I wake up in a cold sweat and I want to put my cheek on his ear. But he's not there and I can't sleep. I'm afraid of what I might see in my dreams.

After I took his ball into my room, I called Camilla. I don't even know what I said, but she came over right away. She drove me to the park. We walked around. I couldn't talk. I could only choke. The image of his face, alert, ever hopeful, didn't jibe with that still mask under the tarp. I was afraid that image would crowd out the other.

Camilla held my hand in both of hers. We walked without speaking. She didn't try to say she knew how I felt. When we came to a bench, she sat me down and put her arms around me. She pressed her cheek to my cheek. I felt the wetness of her tears on my face and she felt mine.

I've trudged through two days of school, more in a trance than awake. At least I can be distracted at school. Not like at home. I've tried to stay away from home as

much as possible. Stayed at Matt's last night. My parents understand. Now the school day is over, and I'm dragging myself across campus. One foot in front of the other. Sick at heart.

I'm walking through the student parking lot toward my car. Joe is leaning against it, waiting for me. What's this going to be about? I know it won't be good.

He sees me now and walks toward me. "Hey, Rego."

"Hey, Joe. What's up?"

We stroll back toward my car.

"Listen, Rego, I wanted to be the one to tell you. They let Lance out three days ago. I just found out."

"How could they do that?"

"Just a bureaucratic glitch. Someone fell asleep at the switch. That's just a way to say they screwed up. They forgot. I'm sorry."

"They said they would warn me."

"Yeah, they promised they'd notify me, too. They didn't."

"And it's only been six months."

"They think he's made enough progress to be out on the street. He'll have to continue counseling and probation. And he'll go to a special school. But he'll be around the neighborhood."

"What about the court ordering him to stay away from me?"

"That's still in place. If he comes near you, or tries to contact you, he violates the order."

"But it's just a piece of paper."

"It carries the force of law. But ultimately, you're right. It's only a piece of paper. If he violates it, just call 9-1-1. Or call me."

find my wits and I'm beginning to boil. He's been out three days, Rex was hit two days ago.

"Did you kill Rex?" I feel like I might do something crazy. Now I am shaking, with rage.

He takes a step back. "Rego, Rego, I'm hurt to the core that you would even ask me that. Rex and I were buddies from way back."

I imagine my hands around his throat. But then I picture Joe and I can hear him saying I'm not in this alone. And Camilla taking my hands in hers. I take a deep breath. "Stay out of my way, Lance," comes out like a growl. I turn toward my house.

As I take a step, he touches my arm lightly, and whispers, almost inaudibly, "Hey, Rego, I'm making a list."

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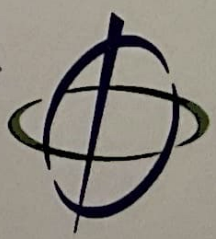

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